

# 11 Incomplete justice is no justice

## Learning from the neoliberal and elitist planning experiences of Euralens and EPA Alzette-Belval

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### Introduction

For those interested in spatial injustice in France, analysing Pas-de-Calais' former mining basin and the Pays Haut Val d'Alzette (in northern Lorraine) comes as an unsurprising choice. Symbolizing the decline of French industry, these regional localities are challenged to address a number of economic and societal challenges. Mainly agrarian until the nineteenth century, the local economies of these two areas were transformed by a rapid rise of the coal and iron mining industry until the mid-twentieth century. Industrial companies steered not only economic growth but also urbanization and provided most of the amenities in a form of "industrial paternalism" (see Reid, 1985). Municipalities were institutionally weak. After more than a century of "industrial glory", the progressive and almost total collapse of industrial activity in our two case study areas provoked a crisis in the 1970s, which remains visible today. In fact, the mining basin of Pas-de-Calais receives the lowest scores for social, economic, health or educational indicators in all of France.

In addition to economic decline, local authorities have faced successive waves of state decentralization since the 1980s and an increased application of neoliberal ideology. While gaining an increasing share of power (particularly in planning) but with limited financial resources, local authorities are urged to reorganize and merge in order to supposedly consolidate their capacities for action. Meanwhile, as in most of European countries, strategic planning has been gradually replaced by project-led planning. Consequently, local authorities have been increasingly expected to shape and implement a territorial strategy in support of their (re)development. Northern Lorraine and Pas-de-Calais are no exceptions. Firstly, and in both regions alike, the local authorities understand their geographic proximity to growing European metropolises as a possible advantage. In these two cases, it is largely proximity to Lille, Brussels and Luxembourg that matters. Secondly, arguing that they are facing particularly adverse circumstances, elected representatives in both areas have demanded compensatory intervention from the state. The state's responses have been twofold. In the 2000s, the French state decided to decentralize the two national museums, with mainly cultural goals in mind

(Baudelle and Krauss, 2014). A branch of the Pompidou Museum opened in Metz, a few kilometres south of the former Lorraine steel valley, as did a branch of the Louvre Museum in Lens (and later the conservation centre of the Louvre Museum in Liévin) in the centre of the Pas-de-Calais mining basin. In the latter, the then Nord Pas-de-Calais Region brought together local actors to create the association “Euralens” which, at that time, was dedicated to supporting and maximizing the arrival of the museum in that territory. In the following decade, the French state set up two specific institutional mechanisms targeting the renewal of housing:

- In northern Lorraine, the public planning establishment EPA Alzette-Belval (EPA AB, EPA standing for *Etablissement Public d'Aménagement*) was commissioned to build housing, thus taking advantage of the high demand resulting from rapid economic growth in Luxembourg;
- In the Pas-de-Calais mining basin, the Commitment for the Renewal of the Mining Basin (*Engagement pour le Renouveau du Bassin Minier*) concentrated the state's efforts on the renewal of particularly degraded and impoverished neighbourhoods that formerly housed workers.<sup>1</sup>

Our chapter examines whether these rather top-down interventions support local governance structures and enable them to drive local development according to their own needs and interests. We examine in particular the extent to which local authorities have been able to initiate local development actions by themselves without oversight from other tiers of governance. We also assess the contribution of these new institutions to fairer decision-making processes by including disadvantaged groups, supposedly the addressees of community development policy. We will first focus on the deep socioeconomic transformations faced by the localities and outline the rationales for action led by the organizations we have identified as the most influential actors in the two case studies. We then question the local authorities' supposed increase in power in the context of increased decentralization, in particular their capacity to develop their own territorial development strategies. Finally, we assess the contributions these actions have made in terms of procedural justice, critically examining the legitimacy of decision-making processes and how the participation of the less powerful and poorest inhabitants is (or is not) organized.

### **Nord Pas-de-Calais and northern Lorraine: two localities, two approaches to fighting spatial injustice**

The former Pas-de-Calais mining basin and northern Lorraine are examples of French localities targeted by public redevelopment policies.<sup>2</sup> Their rapid development, driven by the coal mining and iron mining and metallurgy industries, respectively, until the mid-twentieth century, profoundly affected their respective environments and transformed the landscape. Towns

gradually grew up around the industrial activities, producing diffuse urbanization patterns. All aspects of the workers' lives were organized around the factories and their administration, which managed everything from work to leisure. After the Second World War, the state took over most of the activities in both localities. From the 1970s to the 1990s, they faced a progressive and almost total collapse of their industrial activities, on which local economies were almost exclusively based. Since then, the state along with newly empowered actors – local authorities – has attempted to implement new, sometimes alternative, territorial development strategies.

In their recent strategic documents, policymakers identified the proximity to two emerging European metropolises (Lille and Luxembourg, and, more broadly, the “blue banana”) as potential levers for redevelopment. The major difference between the two cases today is that Pas-de-Calais' socioeconomic situation is still complicated, whereas the socioeconomic indicators for northern Lorraine have gradually improved. The latter region has continued to lose a large number of jobs while paradoxically increasing in population in the form of workers employed in Luxembourg. Since late 1990s, Lorraine's local economy has gradually shifted from a productive economy to a “residential” economy, reaching the symbolic threshold of 100,000 daily commuters from Lorraine to Luxembourg in 2019 (Helfer and Pigeron-Piroth, 2019). Local authorities are still struggling to cope with these transformations, as Luxembourg's job market does not match the skills of the former industrial employees, and requires specific services (e.g., childcare, healthcare services) and public infrastructure that are suited to commuters' needs. The Pas-de-Calais mining basin has faced a more difficult situation. The regional context is less favourable, as Lille, itself facing industrial crisis for several decades, could not appear as an economic driver as strong as Luxembourg. The scale of the crisis was also greater because the end of coal mining has been synonymous with job losses in the several hundreds of thousands. As a result, it still attracts amongst the weakest scores for social, economic, health or educational indicators in France.<sup>3</sup> Its reputation was gradually tainted, contributing to a stigmatization of the region and its inhabitants as a whole, also repelling investors, thus establishing a negative dynamic. In this difficult socioeconomic context, the traditionally very leftist region has seen the far-right party grow stronger, especially in the last decade. At the 2017 parliamentary elections, the four elected MPs from the territory were members of the far-right party – the Rassemblement National (National Rally), or RN – including their leader Marine Le Pen. They have campaigned heavily on immigration and social exclusion issues. Following the local elections of 2020, two of the six most important towns (i.e., Hénin-Beaumont, Bruay-la-Buissière) elected representatives from the National Rally party and in fact Pas-de-Calais has become one of the territories (along with the South-East of France) where National Rally has become firmly anchored. The situation is not quite the same in the north of Lorraine. RN's ratings are admittedly on the rise. One of the most populated municipalities (Hayange) elected a

far-right party representative in 2014 and 2020. Nevertheless, most of the MPs from the territory are members of the Liberal Party (President Macron's political party).

This difference in terms of socioeconomic environment has consequences in terms of local government. While in northern Lorraine, the state still is the main actor in local development in order to steer the Luxembourgish boom in the region, the local actors in Pas-de-Calais have had to organize themselves, as their situation appeared to be less strategic from the state's point of view.

*Euralens, seeking procedural justice through valorization and the cooperation of local actors*

Although profoundly different in nature and implementation, the initiatives under scrutiny aim to support the localities' long-term (re-)development and to reinforce the local governments. Our first case, Euralens, covers the territory of the Pas-de-Calais mining basin. This association was created in 2009 by the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region and brings together regional and local actors. Their intention was to use the establishment of the Louvre museum satellite in Lens as a catalyst, firstly for cultural development and then also for economic and social development. On its website, Euralens presents itself as supporting "the transition from the *black archipelago* [the past of the territory: the coal mines] to the *green archipelago* [supposedly the future of the territory based on green transition and sustainable development]". Citing the examples of Bilbao and Emscher Park, the website states that the ambition is to take "inspiration from great European examples that managed the transformation from industrial legacy into culture and innovation". In 2021, it has two main missions: to prepare and facilitate the emergence of a metropole<sup>4</sup> (positioning itself as a "metropolisation laboratory"); and to foster local development by supporting innovative local initiatives (positioning itself as a "local project incubator").

In formal terms, Euralens is an association involving (1) elected representatives and public officers, (2) public agencies, (3) members of the civil society and (4) business actors. Relatively small, with only four permanent positions, the Euralens team is supported by two renowned landscape and urban planning firms: Jean-Louis Subileau (urban planner, head of the firm "*la fabrique de la ville*") and Michel Desvigne (landscape planner, head of a firm that bears his name), both holders of the "*Grand Prix de l'urbanisme*" awarded annually by the French state. Euralens' main originality lies in its very nature: not being a local institution, it has no decision-making powers. Nevertheless, by hosting and facilitating the discussion between the main public and private actors in the territory (who for decades have had difficulty in communicating), it has become a crucial governance tool. This authority rests partly on its capacity to stimulate strategic discussions and prepare strategic documents (e.g., annual general territorial assessment supporting the

development plan for the mining basin; see the section about development with/without the locality). It also rests on its ability to influence local governments. The constitution of the Artois Metropolitan Pole (PMA) in 2014 is one of Euralens' achievements on the "metropolisation laboratory" side. It is understood as the embryonic form of the future urban community at the scale of the Pas-de-Calais mining basin.

With regard to the local project incubator objective, Euralens has also set up a labelling process for local initiatives. Inspired by the Emscher Park IBA,<sup>5</sup> the Euralens label aims to "support the emergence and the strengthening of high-quality environmental, architectural, social and cultural initiatives that contribute to building a collective identity in a sustainable metropolis". At the beginning of 2021, the Euralens label has been awarded to 58 local initiatives in a wide range of fields (e.g., social and solidarity economy, tourism, culture and sustainable development, logistics and supply chain). According to Euralens employees, these two pillars are instrumental for Euralens to foster both procedural (integrating local development actors in formal territorial policy forums) and distributive (supporting local development) aspects of justice.

*EPA Alzette-Belval, seeking distributive justice by locally exploiting the proximity of the booming Luxembourg economy*

Our second case study, the EPA Alzette-Belval (EPA AB), is a public-led authority mandated by the French state to coordinate the territorial development of eight municipalities located in northern Lorraine, along the border with Luxembourg. Setting up this EPA is the French state's reaction to the redevelopment of the former Belval steel site initiated in the 2000s in the south of Luxembourg. Since then, Belval has become "the science city of Luxembourg" (Leick et al., 2020), hosting most of the country's research centres, higher education institutions, and several national administrations. Facing this extraordinary development just across the border, since the mid-2010s Lorraine's local, regional and national representatives have held the need to define a dedicated strategy to deal with the dependence on economic dynamics in neighbouring Luxembourg and the resulting imbalances as a priority:

On one side of the border, wealth and job creation and, on the other, support functions (e.g. housing, transport, social services – childcare, schools), the cost of which is essentially borne by the French budget, evolves with the call for labour from Luxembourg.

(EPA, 2019: 7)

Furthermore, the mining and steel industry left several wastelands in northern Lorraine, and the soils require decontamination and sanitation on such a scale that local authorities alone would not have been able to cope. The EPA

AB is one answer to deal both with the need to redevelop former industrial sites and with the pressure on land along the border.

In formal terms, the EPA AB is one of the 19 territories in France subject to an Operation of National Interest (OIN). In the arsenal of development tools, the *Etablissement Public d'Aménagement* is the strongest instrument in French planning law. Within its perimeter, it is endowed with legal and technical skills as well as financial resources to implement land strategies and contribute to the development of economic activities (art. L.321–1 of the French urban planning code). The development competences of the municipalities concerned are taken over from them, and for 20–30 years they are exercised by a Public Development Establishment (EPA). The state's taking over of municipalities' planning powers must be justified by "the general interest in terms of planning and sustainable development" within a given perimeter (art. L.321–1 of the town planning code). The day-to-day technical work is undertaken by an operational team of 12 people and directed by a managing director appointed at national level. The EPA AB's main territorial strategy (Strategic Operational Plan, PSO) is periodically revised by the operational team using in-house resources and additional outside counsel. EPA structures are conceived primarily as planning instruments. Routes for the participation of citizens and even local authorities are defined in law.

EPA AB's main missions consist in processing and redeveloping former steel sites, as well as building and marketing housing and commercial spaces. They are usually set up in metropolitan contexts and not, as in Alzette-Belval, in a peri-urban context (29,000 inhabitants, eight municipalities spread over two departments). The reason for such a state intervention is as much the lack of means of the local territory as the significant pressure it is under: more than 70% of the territory's working population is employed in Luxembourg and 20,000 new inhabitants are expected in the territory between 2014 and 2034 (EPA, 2014: 8; EPA, 2019: 4). Summing up, the EPA AB presents itself as an initiative aiming at fostering spatial justice, and in particular redistributive justice, since it coordinates investments supporting the locality's development.

To better understand how these actions are perceived by local actors within the localities, and to determine to what extent they contribute to enhancing their capacities, if at all, we review the broader institutional framework in which they are framed in the next section.

### **Beyond decentralization: justice with or without the state**

Since the 1980s, the French state has increased decentralization. In parallel, it has encouraged small municipalities to merge into intercommunal groupings, in order, supposedly, to improve the quality of their services and reduce their administration costs. As they have been challenged to deal with the social and infrastructural costs connected to the decline of the industry and by their

peripheral location, less well-off localities such as the Pas-de-Calais mining basin and Northern Lorraine accept territorial groupings only reluctantly, while appealing to the state for dedicated support.

*At the local level: historically weak inter-municipality cooperation or a way to keep control?*

The neoliberal ideology behind decentralization in France is quite similar to that of other places in Europe. Epstein and Pinson describe the French situation as being less one of a strong state but rather that of a “regime of multiple governmentalities” within which the local level would progressively gain a reinforced autonomy (2021). Arguing that the French state has become less and less legitimate and efficient in a globalized world, governments have led successive decentralization reforms since 1983, at the same time inviting local municipalities to merge and giving more competences and means to new intercommunal institutions. The main arguments behind such a move are the alleged reduction of costs, the so-called pooling of skills in territorial engineering, but also a view that democracy would be accomplished more at the local level, a “reading tinged with evolutionism”, warned Desage (2020). Regarding all those arguments, recent research has indeed called for caution: “a democratic presupposition is spontaneously attached to the local, conceived as the ‘natural’ home of democracy and citizen participation . . . this assimilation between ‘local’ and ‘democracy’ is far from obvious” (Douillet and Lefebvre, 2017: 237).

Faced with this invitation to merge, which looks more and more like a forced march towards inter-municipality cooperation, local politicians in our two case studies have resisted it for several reasons. Beyond traditional political divides, our interviews show that some local politicians fear that their ability to influence decision-making could be reduced. Rather than the idealistic view that political groupings could be made by choice around a common territorial project, municipalities have engaged in avoidance: to resist joining with a poor territory with which sharing financial means would have been required, or to avoid being associated with communities that are too large.

The local planners’ views are less kind to local politicians, as they point mainly to the lack of a tradition of cooperation. Most of them have described a territory undermined by political divisions, between political parties or within the same political party. Whereas such a situation is part of the political realm, the consequences have been tragic, according to some interviewees in Pas-de-Calais: “Acting like this, the territory has been reproducing its own peripherality” (A1, 2018<sup>6</sup>). A quick look at the distribution of power – here, official responsibilities – in recent times shows a tradition of political lineages: “Here, politicians are still in the Middle Ages, each one of them at the head of what he thinks to be his own barony, in perpetual competition with the neighbouring baronies” (N9, 2018). This conception of power also affects the mode of leadership: “As soon as someone is responsible for something,

the neighbour is jealous and wants some kind of power too. [They] rarely serve the common good, they serve their own interests” (ibid.).

In the Pas-de-Calais context, the emergence of Euralens in 2009 is thus striking. It covers three conurbations (Béthune-Bruay, Hénin-Carvin and Lens-Liévin), whose merger (sometimes envisaged between them, sometimes also with neighbouring territories such as Arras and Douai) is constantly being put off by local politicians. According to most of the local planners interviewed, local cooperation is still “unnatural” to them since “the territory has been externally run for two centuries by private companies and then by the state” (A1). Another explanation advanced for this lack of cooperation is sometimes that of political morphology: the scattered urban form is presented as an insurmountable difficulty since “in comparison to most French metropolitan areas, there is no big city, and no *natural leader* that can position him- or herself as the main centre of the urban area” (ibid.). In this context, before the existence of Euralens, political cooperation at the level of the mining basin was presented as practically non-existent, and even today it still seems rather weak and difficult.

A similar conclusion can be drawn for the EPA AB, whose perimeter corresponds to the territory of the CCPHVA (standing for “Community of Municipalities of the Pays Haut Val d’Alzette”). Created in 2005, the CCPHVA is one of the smallest groupings of municipalities in France. The logic of avoidance applies here too, as local politicians created it to avoid joining two larger groupings (led by the municipalities of Thionville and Longwy) and to keep as many responsibilities as possible at the municipal level. Yet divergences of political views are numerous between the eight local mayors. It was even on the brink of dissolving in 2019. Historical reasons are sometimes invoked to justify claimed incompatibilities. The former French-German border crossing its territory remains in people’s minds, affecting daily habits, and explain some societal differences (e.g., Moselle law, architectural and sociocultural differences) between two municipalities located in Meurthe-et-Moselle and the six others in Moselle. To explain such limited cooperation, local planners also point to political tensions (although the political leaders of the two main towns Villerupt and Audun-le-Tiche have, in recent decades, almost always have been from the same left-wing party) and more importantly the lack of a prospective territorial vision.

Thus, in both cases, inter-municipality cooperation is still associated with political complexity and does not allow the emergence of strategic visions and the reinforcing of territorial engineering as it was supposed to. We do not mean to imply that the problem is only technical. This is not just a question of finding a “good” scale of cooperation, as we share the view expressed in the literature that there is no good scale *per se* (Douillet and Lefebvre, 2017). From our point of view, there is rather a need to re-politicise the political debate around decentralization to better understand why democracy at the local level does not work so well and why some local politicians are resisting cooperation. Desage and Guéranger claim that the weak results

of decentralization in France come mainly from the difficulty of mayors sharing local power that they have concentrated in their hands for decades, which is expressed by their (growing) will to separate places of deliberation and places of decision-making (2014). We will see in the next two sections that our results tend to confirm such an assertion. But before that, we will explore what may appear to be a contradictory claim (but is not) in times of decentralization in our two case studies: the local demand for more state involvement.

### *Longing for state support*

Some of the interviewees in both case studies shared a common view of the state: it is not sufficiently present, albeit very much needed. In the Pas-de-Calais mining basin for instance, one of the interviewees says: “In this territory, we need a Jacobin state, because only the state has the capacity to look at the bigger picture and impose a more collaborative approach of territorial development on local politicians” (N15, 2018). This interviewee and some others argue that the state’s presence in the territory is not up to the enormous task at stake, in particular the two state-devolved instruments in the mining basin, the assistant Prefect in Lens and the new state political tool for the mining basin mentioned before, the ERBM (which is an inter-ministerial tool). When we interviewed them, those two state representatives agreed with such a statement and endorsed it, justifying the state’s weak involvement by its lack of means (limited human and financial resources) and its lack of political willingness to endorse such a Jacobin positioning. According to them, this call for the state is somehow a way for local authorities to refuse to endorse their own responsibility in planning territorial development, a tendency they explain by the so-called historical centralization of power in France. From our point of view, it is nothing less than an ideological take on the situation on both sides. When the neoliberal agenda supports the state’s disengagement (and the state’s public servants justify it), for the local leftist politicians that are still the majority at the local level, the state is the only entity to lead public action, as it is perceived as being in the best position to guarantee distributive justice.

This perception is also clearly discernible in the EPA AB case study. A majority of the local representatives, public servants and inhabitants interviewed share the feeling that only the state has the necessary financial resources, leadership and adequate tools to steer local development. The challenges they point out are indeed numerous and large: the “attractiveness needs to be boosted”, “brownfields need to be sanitised and decontaminated” and “infrastructure should be upgraded to welcome a growing population” (2019). For this reason, most of the local representatives welcome the implementation of the EPA in the region: “we think that [without] what’s going on [EPA’s activities], we wouldn’t have been able to do it on our own. If there had not been the OIN, development would still be taking place,

but in an uncontrolled manner” (PI24, 2018). Given the persistence of the economic boom in Luxembourg, most of the local politicians declared to us that the state appears to them to be the only authority able to foster territorial development at a level to match the Luxemburgish economy.

Yet the way the EPA operates leaves very little room for municipalities to be part of the deliberation – or even of the decision-making processes. The EPA AB is managed by a board of directors, bringing together its financial contributors from the national, regional and departmental authorities (5 representatives of the state, 5 of the region Grand Est, 3 for each of the *départements* Moselle and Meurthe-et-Moselle and 2 for the CCPHVA). Representatives of the municipalities have been given only two seats (one with voting rights, one as an observer) since the creation of the EPA. This situation seems paradoxical, since the EPA AB’s mission is the territorial development of these municipalities and given that CCPHVA is politically contested by several municipalities.

From the state’s point of view, its role is only to “seek a consensus around the project and promote the national interest while taking into account local issues”.<sup>7</sup> What is more questionable is what is meant by “local issues” and, more precisely, if it is legitimate for local politicians to have an opinion on them. But what is even more striking is that despite this strong imbalance, elected representatives have overwhelmingly welcomed the cooperation with EPA AB:

When the OIN arrived, I took it very well, even if there were still concerns for the elected representatives: who will decide, will we lose our ability to decide, etc. Today, we realise that this is not the case. [. . .] They [the EPA AB] didn’t go anywhere to impose anything. (Interview with a local public servant, in Lens, 14. 06. 2018. Interview key P24)

It seems that for them, the feeling of having been forgotten by the French state for decades during and after the industrial crisis overtook the need to be closely associated to the decision-making and the deliberation. To counterbalance their lack of a deliberating process, most of the local representatives we met have developed a specific strategy: they organize bilateral meetings with the EPA-AB. In terms of procedural justice, this seems to us problematic, since the arena for representative democracy, the CCPHVA, is thus bypassed and weakened, whereas by contrast, the technical and less democratic state agency is legitimized and reinforced. What we mean by less democratic is the fact that inhabitants of the CCPHVA have no direct control over the decisions taken.

Our assertion is also confirmed by the observation that some inhabitants have contested the EPA AB projects but also the incapacity of their elected representatives to represent them. They also complain that planning projects are thought mainly to accommodate the consequences of Luxembourg’s

booming economy. In their eyes (and the figures do not prove them wrong), the EPA is more about the construction of new housing for future inhabitants rather than the renovation of old mining neighbourhoods occupied by actual inhabitants, while nothing is done about the increase of the costs of living. This rising local discontent not only resulted in the EPA AB withdrawing some projects, but also eventually provoked some political change, as new representatives were elected at the local elections in 2020 in several municipalities in the territory (see the section on procedural justice).

Beyond the *cliché* that local authorities continue to request Paris' approval despite decentralization, our case studies demonstrate contrasting situations. In both territories, the state continues to appear in the eyes of most of the local politicians, civil servants and inhabitants as the only actor able to act in their complicated post-industrial situation and to re-establish some distributive justice. Nevertheless, the EPA AB case shows that inhabitants demonstrate an increasing will to have their say in the planning of their territory, to make sure that their interests are taken into consideration beyond those of the state and of the local politicians. The next section will show that such a claim is also made in the Euralens context, although the structure is supposedly more in the local hands.

### **Can development without the locality be just? And what does “with the locality” mean?**

At a first glance, Euralens and EPA AB seem quite opposite in their nature. Euralens is a forum aiming at renewing strategic territorial thinking. As an association without power or dedicated competence, its capacity for action is limited. EPA AB, by contrast, has the capacity to elaborate and to implement a territorial strategy, but it drives local development *in* the locality, rather than *with* it. We will see in this section that these two structures have more in common than it seems at first sight.

#### *Euralens, (performing) the “success-story” of a forum of local actors*

The very existence of an initiative such as Euralens fills a gap in territorial governance: “*Euralens would not exist if a proper adapted territorial governance tool were already in place in this region*” (N13, 2018). As imperfect and chaotic as some interviewees say it appears, it expresses an alternative vision: “*With Euralens, the idea is not to create a territorial strategy out of nothing, but to create the conditions for the territory to create one of its own by itself*” (A1, 2018). On the basis of the observation that the territory does not have a tradition of political cooperation, rather than creating yet another supra-municipal structure, Euralens employees see themselves as facilitators. Taking their lack of resources as a starting point, their approach is rather pragmatic: instead of developing a territorial strategy that their structure

or others would not have the means to carry, Euralens attempts to bring the existing structures to build and foster the convergence of existing strategies. It intends to demonstrate that cooperation can strengthen the territory: “*Euralens aims at creating a relationship between local actors and tries to demonstrate that all would win by working together, by cooperating*” (N15, 2018).

Euralens aims at being exemplary and reproduces most of the current urban planning buzz concepts: it promotes participatory processes, presenting them as tools for legitimizing and anchoring the territorial action; it involves international experts and develops private-public partnerships to feed territorial reflection. Their action is not only pragmatic but also strategic; they aspire to be seen as the “model pupil” of regeneration and resilience at the local, regional, national and even European level. But by following the flow and wanting to “catch up” from the region’s supposed backwardness, Euralens runs the risk of reproducing recipes from elsewhere that are not necessarily adapted to local needs.

Despite its limits, Euralens’ action appears to be effective for most of the local planners, especially in its consistent production of strategic thinking. Over the last decade, three kinds of documents have been produced. Firstly, Euralens supports the yearly ex-post evaluation of the Louvre-Lens museum. Even if “a museum cannot save a territory alone” (P21, 2018), most of the interviewees (politicians, planners and inhabitants alike) consider its installation as a success. It welcomes more visitors than expected and it develops strategies to empower its inhabitants, including the most modest ones. Euralens also created a board of experts called the “quality circle”, which consists of the two private urban planning agencies and about ten award-winning international experts in urban and regional planning. The “quality circle” publishes yearly spatial planning recommendations, either project-centred reflections on strategic infrastructure or on future planning documents. The “Chain of Parks” plan has, for example, become the first ecological vision for the Pas-de-Calais mining basin. Euralens thirdly initiates participative forums bringing together institutional actors, representatives from the civil society and inhabitants to collectively discuss strategic subjects chosen bottom-up during its general assemblies (e.g., 2016: participation of inhabitants, 2017: energy, 2018: Youth and Citizens’ Engagement).

Participatory observations confirm that the quality circle stimulates an exchange of best practice. As they value the knowledge of inhabitants, forums can be the place for lively debate with large groups (exceeding 200 in 2018). In a politically fragmented locality, this is a major accomplishment in terms of procedural justice. More importantly, Euralens attempts to change as much the dynamics of exchange and action at the local level as the image of the territory (breaking with territorial stigmatization). A substantial part of the budget is used to implement and to communicate this change at the same time. For the 10th anniversary of Euralens in 2019, for instance,

it launched “*Odyssée*, the story of a territory that is reinventing itself and revealing itself in a new light”. This eventful year was set up to narrate local “success stories” and to demonstrate the territory’s transformations. This progressive change of image inside and outside the locality is perceived as crucial by local planners in order to make it more attractive, but may also be interpreted as quite cynical as it concentrates more on the storytelling of the change than on the structural change in itself.

Thus, although Euralens is indeed a forum of local actors that tries to develop its own territorial development strategy, our work has shown that the association has difficulty in producing its own thinking. It is still very much influenced by the major current buzzwords of urban planning and claims to be actively benchmarking, setting the great European success stories (Bilbao, Emscher Park) as a model to be achieved. This implicitly means accepting the idea that the Pas-de-Calais coalfield has a “backlog” to “catch up” rather than simply its own path to follow. The functioning of Euralens is then less “autonomous” than expected, in the sense that if the territory has equipped itself with a tool allowing it to deliberate locally, for the moment it has difficulties in developing a line of thinking anchored in local knowledge, and in particular its inhabitants who remain left aside (we explore this further in the following section on procedural justice). Moreover, due to lack of resources, the association focuses its action on procedural injustices by multiplying places of deliberation, without having the means to tackle structural inequalities or, to put it another way, to address the redistributive dimension of spatial injustice.

*The EPA AB, a massive but anchorless action: what roots does it produce locally?*

Differently to Euralens in its form and intention, the EPA AB acts rather as a satellite implementing a national development strategy in a locality. On the EPA AB website, the structural goal is spelled out as “[the creation] of an eco-agglomeration and a sustainable development centre serving the whole of Lorraine and the CCPHVA in particular, a genuine area of cooperation on economic development with Luxembourg”. Initially, the state conceived the creation of the EPA as the institutional ground allowing ambitious territorial development projects to develop, that is, the construction of a cross-border health centre, a centre for information and communication technologies (e.g., datacentres) (Salmon, 2011). But no political consensus between public and private actors from Luxembourg and France has been found so far on this implementation of cross-border services, each side of the border blaming the other for this failure. Against this background, EPA AB refocused its action to currently support the development of residential activities (e.g., real estate, hospitality sector) which are the usual core focus of action of the EPA tool in France, but also to promote local food networks and community activities services on the French side of the border (EPA

AB, 2019). Concerned with the major demographic growth that is foreseen (i.e., a doubling of the population between 2009 and 2030), the EPA AB has decided to concentrate on the building of housing for the future population and on the adaptation of related infrastructure (e.g., transport). By constructing 400 new units a year, it aims mostly to tackle the current pressure on land and to limit any increase in real estate prices. The main impact in terms of distributive justice seems to us to lie in the coordination of land recycling, planning activities and the imposition of strict specifications in respect of (in particular ecological) norms; this engagement in decontamination and construction of housing is up to a level that municipalities could never have afforded without the technical, financial and conceptual support of the state. It would appear that the EPA AB does not try to promote a more localized and varied model of territorial development, but simply seeks to adapt its development to neighbouring Luxembourg's strategy. This strategic reorientation is likely to perpetuate the economic dependency of northern Lorraine on one activity (here: Luxembourg's market) over which it has no control, instead of supporting the emergence of endogenous development.

If the way in which Euralens builds its territorial thinking has limits, Euralens tries nonetheless to create public debate, building on local and external knowledge. In contrast, the EPA AB structure is so conceived that its expertise remains mostly shared with planning experts in nationwide networks rather than shared locally or internationally. The EPA AB strategic vision and spatial imaginary is largely shaped by its participation in networks steered by the state (with other 13 EPAs, with about 30 other EcoCités and other national agencies, i.e., the national agency for territorial cohesion, ANCT). Even when the state establishes localized branches, it does so without opening a space for exchange of ideas and for deliberation, not to mention shared or co-constructed decision-making. Exchanges with the locality essentially involve local planners and consist of consultations about the practicalities of the implementation of the EPA AB's projects.

Whereas Euralens serves as a platform coordinating local actors towards strategic planning and changing the image of the territory, its limited mandate and resources make it difficult to measure its impact on the ground. In contrast, the EPA AB is a heavier and more effective tool, steering massive housing construction, thus avoiding scattered urbanization. Both initiatives are imperfect in terms of procedural justice, albeit to widely differing degrees. The EPA AB is poorly permeable and receptive to local input from other public authorities or civil society, at least when the fieldwork was conducted. If Euralens as a forum of local actors performs better in this domain, it still does not value local inhabitants' and civil society knowledge (in particular of the poor, as we will see in the section on procedural justice). Thus, it functions as a circle of planners, admittedly local, but just as much in a position of knowledgeable experts.

Both initiatives are primarily thought of as planning endeavours in a rather restricted sense. They fail to actively consider the societal significance of their action within their respective localities, making a limited contribution for Euralens, and no contribution at all for the EPA, in terms of procedural justice. And because they both have limited impact on enabling local authorities to steer their own development, they may have a limited impact in terms of distributive justice. And again, the “EPA AB model” seems to a certain extent the most limited one in terms of distributive justice, as it does not break with the ideology of dependency on an externally led mono-activity. What possible resilience for tomorrow is there if the intervention does not strengthen the locality in its capacity to imagine, discuss and implement several possible futures?

### **Procedural justice without the (disadvantaged) local inhabitants is not procedural justice**

In both cases, forms of participative and deliberative democracy (here conceived as the public participation in the decision-making process in any form, Blondiaux and Fournau, 2011), if not simply absent, is still very imperfectly implemented. In two post-industrial disadvantaged regions, what is most striking to us is that the (numerous) poor, and the inhabitants more generally, are still considered as objects upon which a territorial development strategy is implemented rather than subjects who may have a say in a territorial development strategy in which they have a primary interest.

#### *Euralens: ignoring and reproducing discrimination in the decision-making process*

In the case of Euralens, some interviewees point out the conceptual and methodological flaws of participation as it is implemented.

It is too easy to say that we ought to set up a real participatory approach but in the end not do it, by pretending that we do not know how to do it; as much as it is too easy to say that we should not organise participation because anyway inhabitants know nothing and it is just a waste of time.

Most of the interviewees point out that political decisions are taken, in closed circles, amongst only heads of services and, for them, this limits the reflection: “They do not know everything. They actually know a great deal about their middle-class habits, but they know very little about the others. And since they are all the same, they usually agree with one another” (P16, 2018).

Despite its forum, Euralens has not yet turned its decision-making process from a consultative to a participative form of democracy. P16 suspects that

the value added by participation is not understood or even valued: “Do we really listen? And do we really want to listen? I think we do not have the right answer simply because we do not ask the right questions”. The desire to stick with the institutional way of making public policy is problematic because it produces projects that refuse to engage with people’s aspirations, thus producing overhanging projects in the locality. This contributes to reproducing public action centred on policymakers rather than on “policy receivers”.

In the context of Euralens, local institutions have set up similar policies seeking to (1) demonstrate their own success, (2) legitimize their existence in a context of institutional reorganization, (3) prove the relevance of their jobs that are constantly at risk while services are merged, and (4) claim their political soundness in a highly volatile political context. For instance, between 2012 and 2020, Euralens (a public institution), the Foundation of France (private) and the Pas-de-Calais department (public) developed their own programme in support of local development. While some provide technical support, others provide financial support. They work in different yet congruent perimeters, either targeting local public institutions or civil society-based actions. They also have their own approach towards practice learning and ensuring synergies between projects. Those three policies are at the same time (very) similar and (slightly) different. Even though these myriads of initiatives provide several opportunities for support, these also mean greater administrative work that “comes on top of the regional, national and European administrative burden” (N20, 2018). These are rather restrained, in terms of both funding and the technical support they provide. In terms of public action efficiency, this scattering of human and financial resources is questionable, especially as the success of the three policies creates jealousies between institutions and politicians, to the extent that other territories, other scales want to reproduce (even more) such a policy of support for local initiatives. For policy recipients, it is quite unlikely that these frameworks represent additional funding opportunities for them since the same public institutions are directly or indirectly funding bodies behind them.

Beyond participation in decision-making, power relationships is another issue that is almost never addressed or questioned. Let us take here the example of the Euralens “label” as a supporter of local development initiatives. The Euralens technical committee is composed of a majority of institutional actors that have similar sociological profiles (e.g., old, white, upper middle-class, educated, heterosexual male, that live outside of the territory, i.e., Lille, Paris). Local initiative holders we interviewed were often younger, less educated, deprived women born in the territory. This power imbalance can create rather uncomfortable situations (including sometimes sexual harassment), as it is informally expected that project leaders maintain their professional network with in-person meetings. Gender and age balance are not proactively taken as criteria for the composition of Euralens committees. Yet, as pointed out by feminist literature, such criteria could be gatekeepers for

better accountability. This matter is a reflection of a still very patriarchal territory. Although this goes beyond Euralens' responsibility, it is also inconsistent with its claim to build a laboratory for future local government. As the locality does not offer an accountable and transparent decision-making process, public engagement is highly volatile. Despite being the locus of encounters and negotiations for local initiative holders, Euralens is not yet a forum for open debates and shared deliberations that would allow the development of more consistent local public action. But is such a thing achievable?

*EPA AB: when procedural injustice leads to political opposition*

The main difference between the EPA AB and Euralens in terms of participation is that the EPA AB objective is not to reinforce dialogue locally. And the participation of the local (inhabitants, political representatives, planners) is kept to a minimum, performed to comply with planning regulation. Some inhabitants point out their disillusionment about such meetings and other forms of consultation: "Our ideas are not at all what is currently carried out. We simply let it happen, we observe. We tried, we did believe in it. But no, these meetings are illusory, that is to say, they are just ways to validate what has been decided" (Field visit 19.07.2018). Fundamental decisions are taken by the EPA AB planners when defining the planning strategy (PSO) and are validated by a board with a majority of representatives from the state and the region. The installation of an EPA structure shows that from the point of view of the state, national strategic issues are superior to local desires.

In a very similar way to the Euralens case, local politicians do not see a problem in not consulting (as a minimum) the population. And to justify it, Pas-de-Calais (and most French) politicians argue that public participation is not effective and does not "work", whereas most of the time they have never actively tried to implement participation. We argue that they rather do not want or know how to run participatory and deliberative democracy. As for Euralens again, local politicians valorize informal decision-making processes precisely because these are faster, less cumbersome and require no involvement of the population, no transparency of the decision-making process and no accountability. This is precisely what causes inhabitants' dissatisfaction. The decisions about the territorial strategy of northern Lorraine are not publicly discussed and remain the prerogative of an elitist techno-political inner circle disconnected from the local population that is affected most directly.

This rather "old-fashioned" way of planning has driven local rejection of an EPA AB-led project. Dissatisfied with those information meetings, movements of opposition have grown outside institutional channels. For instance, "*Boulangeois solidaire*" emerged in Boulange (approximately 2,500 inhabitants) to oppose to the EPA AB housing project in the municipality (the construction of 350 new housing units). They have two main arguments: the refusal to become a dormitory for new rich commuters working in Luxembourg and concerns about seeing local taxes increase to cope with the expense

linked to the adaptation of public infrastructure. At first glance, it would be easy to see in this resistance not much more than a NIMBY phenomenon in one rural municipality in which the inhabitants reject urbanization. But one may also see in this reaction class struggles as actual (often disadvantaged) inhabitants resist the arrival of a new richer population of commuters or, in other words, the gentrification of this popular neighbourhood. Opposition movements have emerged in several municipalities covered by the EPA, including the more urban ones such as Audun-le-Tiche (approximately 7,000 inhabitants) and Villerupt (approximately 9,500 inhabitants). In the three municipalities we mentioned here, civil society movements have transformed into political platforms and ran for the 2020 municipal elections. And they won. All mentioned their opposition to the way the EPA AB operates in the territory, and all called for more participatory forms of democracy to be implemented (at the level of the municipality in general and in relation to the EPA AB planning projects in particular). One of their key arguments is that urbanization is not an obligation. Former brownfield sites have, since the end of mining, slowly evolved into green areas that represent for them a more precious amenity for the actual inhabitants than the arrival of commuters to/from Luxembourg. Some local associations insist on the necessity to educate people about the history of these places (and the former mining activity), the sensitivity of fauna and flora in these sites and the need to protect them: “Instead of a new neighbourhood, a magnificent natural area . . . should be promoted. But who will take care of that, if not us?”

## Conclusion

As Desage and Guéranger (2011) observed in similar situations to the ones we describe in northern Lorraine and in Pas-de-Calais, there is a need to reinvent public action and to open decision-making processes to representatives of civil society. In a subsequent article Desage and Guéranger (2014: 156) were even more adamant in their formulation: “To get back what has been taken from them, activist groups and citizens will have to take up local issues themselves, hold their elected representatives to account [for their acts, their decisions], and disturb the quiet of discreet arrangements”. It seems they have been heard in northern Lorraine, where inhabitants and civil society have politicized their struggle in the attempt to regain control over the planning of their territory. In this context, it seems that resistance arose from procedural injustice (understood as the lack of participation of the population and civil society in the deliberation and decision-making procedures of EPA AB). It also seems that what is perceived as an act of distributive justice from a national perspective (an attempt to draw Luxembourg’s development towards the French territory) is perceived as distributive injustice at the local level, as it would lead to the gentrification of the territory and to the erasure of its history and of its ecological interest.

Paradoxically, the situation is more blurred in Pas-de-Calais. To a certain extent, Euralens has made part of the task implementing forums of actors at different levels that partially valorized local knowledge and partially integrated some representatives of the civil society in the deliberation-making process. It appears to us an incomplete move, as we show that the decision-making process has not been opened by even an inch to civil society and the inhabitants. As for the EPA AB, the main decisions are still taken by local patriarchal figures (e.g., political and technical leaders), without the involvement of and control by the citizens. This incomplete procedural justice risks threatening Euralens' progress, as the rejection of the political class and its methods is expressed more and more through abstention (at a record level in the last local elections<sup>8</sup>) and the persistence of voting for the right-wing Rassemblement National (National Rally) party. In terms of distributive justice, the action of Euralens is also more difficult to isolate in comparison to the EPA AB action, essentially because Euralens is just a forum of actors and does not hold formal competences. It attempts to influence the planning practices of the existing association of municipalities' planners and political representatives, mainly through benchmarking and the change in the representation of the territory. But here again, and as for the EPA AB case, what change can really be accomplished if the ambition to transform the territory is conceived, decided and performed mostly without its population? If Euralens takes seriously the valorization of local development initiatives, as it pretends through its labelling process, then why not be more ambitious about that too? To have a real impact on the territory, shouldn't Euralens seek to strengthen and simplify the technical and financial support given to project leaders that are currently weak and scattered? To what extent does the multiplication of labelling processes that put project leaders in competition with one another each year for modest sums not rather lead to them being exhausted and frustrated by the political control? To what extent is a label just more than free use of their images for marketing purposes? Or in other words, to what extent is spatial justice incompatible with local agendas that remain very much inspired by neoliberalism and its managerial techniques? Indeed, the Euralens case is paradoxical, undeniably pursuing spatial justice goals, but through spatially unjust means, thus resistance is more difficult.

## Notes

- 1 These were one part of the larger area of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais mining basin classified on the UNESCO World Heritage list as a "remarkable cultural landscape". For more details, see: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1360/>.
- 2 Detailed analysis of individual cases is available in Blondel (2019) and Evrard (2019), while a systematic comparison of them is available in Evrard and Blondel (2019).
- 3 For a comparison of key statistics between the two case studies, see Evrard and Blondel (2019: 33).

- 4 New local public authority (Etablissement public de coopération intercommunale) established in French law in 2015 to support the metropolitan functions of secondary cities in France.
- 5 “Internationale Bauausstellung”: Universal Exhibition in Architecture and Urbanism.
- 6 Full references of interview quotes relating to Euralens case study are available in Blondel (2019), and in Evrard (2019) for EPA AB case study.
- 7 Ministry in charge of spatial planning’s webpage: [www.cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/](http://www.cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/).
- 8 In Pas-de-Calais, the turnout in the first round of the departmental elections was 35.2% in 2021, 35.0% in the first round of the regional elections the same year, and 47.8% in the first round of the municipal elections in 2020.

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