Eurocity: From Political Construction to Local Demand . . . Or Vice-Versa?

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Abstract: This study presents a diagnostic analysis of the concept of the Eurocity. It aims to compare the initial intentions of the concept with its actual results from the perspective of a sustainable local development approach, particularly assessing the attention given to local governance and its potential for boosting this development paradigm. To this end, a range of internal documents and press reports of the Guadiana Eurocity were analyzed, and 15 in-depth interviews and one focus group were conducted with the main stakeholders involved in implementing local development policy in order to uncover the cognitive structure of their collective discourse and the potentials and expectations of the Eurocity. The results showed that the Guadiana Eurocity seemed to be the cross-border and European integration entity with the most legitimacy among these municipalities for carrying out sustainable local development strategies. Its structure and closeness to residents' daily lives, however, were not sufficient guarantees of its success.

1. Introduction

We are currently experiencing a paradoxical era when globalizing tendencies are driving institutions at all territorial levels to join in a race for positioning on the world stage [1]. Within them, the dominant idea of economic development has prevailed over other approaches. At the same time, other institutions fronting small and medium-sized towns and cities have championed their unique features as spokespeople for the local territory, which higher-level institutions and actors cannot represent. The European Union—aware of the challenges of uneven development among urban and rural areas, as well as north, south, old, and new member states—has found the best possible way to achieve European cohesion in the fullest concept of sustainable development [2]. Additionally, all of this is occurring at a time when Sustainable Development Objectives [3] and the 2030 European Agenda are forming the basis of all initiatives on the continent. This concept of development, present in an incalculable number of development policies, also appears in cross-border cooperation initiatives in which, after several decades, the local dimension and the participation of local political and socioeconomic actors have taken on greater importance.

The Spanish–Portuguese border has seen the emergence of new forms of cross-border governance both in the north and in the south over the last ten years. These are the cross-border Eurocities which have arisen from bilateral and trilateral agreements between municipal councils that have acquired a solid track record in cross-border cooperation programs through previous participation in similar initiatives. Their ultimate goal is to become supra-municipal entities with full legal recognition in the form of EGTCs (European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation), a legal format created by

the European Union in order to give statutory powers and greater autonomy to institutional actors addressing the challenges of European integration across border areas.

Living together along the longest, and longest-lasting, of European borders, there are a wide variety of entities and institutional networks in the various cross-border regions or NUTS II (Galicia–North Portugal, North Portugal–Castilla y León, Centro–Castilla y León, Alentejo Centro–Extremadura, Alentejo–Algarve–Andalucía), ranging from working communities, Euroregions and other entities created by the European Council to institutional networks such as the Eixo Atlantico do Noroeste Peninsular (Atlantic Axis of the Northwest Iberian Peninsula) and the RIET (Iberian network of trans-frontier entities). In this area of abundant fusion, Eurocities have appeared to arise as the best spokespeople for local interests, for local residents who really live around and experience the border in their daily lives. This is also why they appear to be legitimate actors for leading the sustainable local development advocated by the European Union, in contrast to the ever-growing distance of regional and national actors from any kind of grassroots-level knowledge.

Along the Spanish–Portuguese border, the rise of the Eurocities has signalled a shift in the tendency of cross-border cooperation, advocating greater rootedness in the territory, the promotion of sustainable development and more local-level cross-border cooperation. Recent studies have also highlighted the obstacles to, and in some cases high expectations of, the Eurocities. In this study, we provide a diagnostic analysis of the Guadiana Eurocity EGTC as a sustainable local development project through a content analysis of a range of documentary sources and the discourses gathered from a total of 14 interviews and one focus group conducted with specialists and experts working in the Eurocity.

2. Intercity Cross-Border Networks as a Keystone For Sustainable Development

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the competitiveness of the globalized age has led cities to create cooperation networks among themselves in order to enhance competitive capacity and operate more effectively [4]. These networks are underpinned by multifaceted complementarity for reasons of geography, functionality in the territorial framework making up their context (province, region, etc.), size, and shared political and economic interests. On an urban level, European territorial development seems to have adopted two types of intercity networks. The first is the network of secondary or non-capital European cities named Eurocities, initiated in 1986 in Rotterdam with a formal agreement between six cities. This network, which now includes 140 cities, has become a key actor and a powerful lobby in the design of European urban policy [5–8]. Secondly, there are many cross-border intercity networks of different forms, such as the Eurometropolises, Eurodistricts, twin or sister cities, and those titled cross-border Eurocities, which, through European Territorial Cooperation policies have increased and consolidated their transnational cooperation networks. This make Europe a well-covered region of twin towns and cities [9,10].

In line with the strengthening of the urban and local dimension of EU policy in its 2014–2020 programs, the European Union has set the goal of enhancing and strengthening connectivity among territories and cross-border cooperation between European cities [11]. This endeavor is yet more important among second-level cross-border cities and towns that form functional transfrontier areas and that, although close to each other, are poorly connected. In fact, the European Territorial Agenda [12] has stresssed the need to develop cross-border and transnational regions as part of its territorial strategy. This type of transfrontier intercity network should help to promote one of the main features of European territorial and urban development as the most balanced in the world, with multi-centered development articulated across both cities and rural areas. In accordance with this, the 2020 Territorial Agenda promotes transnational and cross-border cooperation as an integral part of balanced European territorial development, broadly advocating the integration of European territorial cooperation into national, regional and local development strategies. Nevertheless, cross-border planning still seems to be a pending issue [13].

Cross-border cooperation (CBC) is Strand A of the three facets of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) policy. Various analysts have remarked the importance of cross-border cooperation as one of the

major processes of European integration and at the same time as the European topic which has aroused the most academic interest [14]. Since 1989, ETC has been implemented through the well-known plurinational Interreg programs, which have gradually expanded, quantitatively and territorially, since the integration of the Eastern European countries into the EU. The latest Interreg program, VA (2014–2020), encompasses 60 internal cross-border regions, thereby including more than a third of the European population living in cross-border areas. However, despite the wide reach of this program, a study by Medeiros [15] found that both the European Commission and the national and regional governments involved have, up to now, used these programs as a complementary tool for underpinning their regional development strategy. Despite this, since its inception and through its quantitative expansion, cross-border cooperation has also qualitatively advanced towards a type of cooperation termed second-generation and proximity-based [16]. The project content in this cooperation developed from the predominance of infrastructural schemes and economic competitiveness towards projects based more on the social dimension [17] in an area of proximity, combined with more multilevel governance through the creation of institutions from a bottom-up approach, which, in a decentralized way that gives a greater prominence to local actors, are seen as the instruments of governance closest to the territory itself and its population [18]. These institutional instances take a variety of forms, such as the working communities, the Euroregions set up by the Council of Europe, and, more recently, the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs), which were created by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in 2006 in order to enhance the executive power of these organisms and to facilitate cross-border cooperation between regional and local governments. To these forms of multilevel governance, we should add others such as the Eurodistricts and Eurocities. It is also true, on the other hand, that this profusion of institutions can cause redundancy and confusion in the area of how European Territorial Cooperation A is being developed [19].

Most cross-border regions are NUTS II micro-regions led by local and regional actors [20]. In the case of the intercity networks, many of these, particularly on the Spanish–Portuguese border, are between small and medium-sized cities and towns. The register of the Committee of Regions shows that European territorial policy and cross-border cooperation is increasingly organized through a more decentralized, local strategy, with the growth of urban and local cooperation networks in various formats such as the Eurometropolises, Eurodistricts and Eurocities, all taking the legal form of the European Territorial Grouping. This instrument of cooperation gives the territorial grouping legal personality and thus executive autonomy, and it represents the first real model of transnational governance. The EGTC is seen as an effective tool for consolidating cross-border cooperation [21], as evidenced by its rapid spread in recent years, with a total of 65 EGTCs registered since 2016.

Thus, the role of small and medium cities and towns is becoming more and more important in European regional policy and for sustainability across the European territory [22]. Their function as compensatory actors in territorial development and as key actors in cross-border cooperation has strengthened their positioning as the ideal context for any sustainable development strategy. Features such as geographical proximity, physical proximity, and a propensity towards and greater facility for internal initiatives, all of which can have a real effect on their population's quality of life, make the local environment of small and medium-sized cities and towns key for avoiding rural depopulation, and therefore for restoring balance across a territory. Similarly, these characteristics legitimize the local area as the best possible and most natural context for implementing cross-border cooperation projects through multilevel governance [23,24].

Cross-border cooperation strengthens this potential as a sustainable setting [25], since objectives such as enhancing natural resources (parks, rivers, etc.) and improving their management, addressing shared environmental issues, fostering social innovation and creativity through complementarity in services and/or products, eliminating administrative redundancy, reducing costs and, in general, achieving a "win–win" situation fit into the principles of economic, environmental and social sustainability through the territory-based, decentralized nature of the context.

The adoption of sustainability criteria in cross-border cooperation was more clearly established from the Interreg 2000–2006 program onwards, which set cross-border economic and social development through strategies of sustainable territorial development as its main objective—strategies which have been maintained in all subsequent Interreg programs. Cross-border cooperation, in accordance with European priorities of sustainable development and with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, is also seen as a key instrument of sustainable development in cross-border regions [26,27], through which intercity networks can also make their contribution.

3. Eurocity: An 'Old–New' Political Tool

Among the various networks of cross-border governance, this study centers on analyzing the Eurocity, which has emerged in its most recent form on the Iberian border as a local cross-border model of governance that is complementary to other local and regional networks such as the Euroregions, working communities, the RIET (Iberian Network of Cross-border Entities), and other more extensive ones such as the Eixo Atlantico (Atlantic Axis). Eurocities have arisen as a trend towards decentralisation in which local administrations have strengthened their position as innovators in European integration. Local entities, and mainly those closest to the Spanish–Portuguese border, have undergone the reinvention of their functions as administrators. Cross-border cooperation has increased their strategic political and economic weight, not only on the transfrontier level in their ability to manage European-funded projects with neighboring entities, but also on an international level through the power of international visibility [7,23] gaining status as actors of cross-border cooperation.

We might consider that we are talking about an old political form of cooperation rebuilt upon new format. The Eurocity format is similar to other concepts used to refer to intercity networks, such as the binational cities [28] —which, in the European context, acquire a nature and significance quite different from those in other border areas [29]—and sister/twin cities. There is no evidence available on sister cities as examples of lasting institutional cooperation, but it is known that they can act as precedents [30]. In 2011, there were 55 towns and cities twinned between Spain and Portugal, although the Portuguese had more agreements with other European cities than the Spanish [31]. In terms of our topic here, some of these networks originated from Eurocities, which have strengthened their networks through cross-border cooperation projects within the Interreg programs. Hence, these networks, like the Euroregions and the EGTCs, are regarded as fund-driven [18]. This is in fact the case in the Guadiana Eurocity, comprising Ayamonte–Vila Real de Santo Antonio and Castro Marim, since the twinning of two of its towns, Ayamonte and Vila Real do Santo António, was the antecedent for this greater institutional closeness and was cemented through Interreg projects within the POCTEP (the Spanish–Portuguese Operative Cooperation Programme).

However, Buursink's [32] concept of border-crossing cities would fit the Eurocity better, since it reflects the form and nature of cooperation between two cities which are close or contiguous across a frontier, with clear common interests and projects initiated by public or semi-public authorities [33]. With lesser emphasis on the proximity and continuity of the cross-border urban territory, the Eurocity is defined as a set of agreements between historically-linked municipalities in neighboring countries, with the purpose of sharing resources and creating synergies for joint advancement, thereby attempting to achieve, in the longer term, stronger cohesion and a greater level of development for their region [25,34]. These agreements also make it clear that Eurocities come into being through a shift in approaches to cross-border cooperation, attempting to overcome the institutional and regulatory obstacles erected by their different national regimes. Their projects are designed to develop a more viable type of cooperation and one which will have greater impact on the daily lives of the border population. Additionally, the projects created by these institutional networks lead to socializing effects among this population, within the framework of European integration [23].

This concept of the Eurocity clearly attributes a horizontal character to this model of governance, and it reinforces cross-border cooperation from a bottom–up perspective. It is akin to the highest level of excellence in cross-border cooperation, represented by the genuine or optimum cooperation

model that analysts such as Medeiros [35] have spoken of in the context of the Euroregion, or Sohn's "territorial project" [36]. In this model, intermittent institutional links are broadened, and there is greater trust between actors, combined with a clear political will, which develop common public services on the basis of a joint view of the territory, which involves strong socioeconomic flows and the real and effective participation of local actors in planning strategy [37]. It is also the arena in which political willingness and the engagement of actors such as companies, entrepreneurs and citizens on the Spanish–Portuguese border have become main driving factors [36]. This ideal model of cross-border cooperation stresses its strong rootedness in the local territory, as is the case of the Eurocity, since this is the most suitable factor for creating trust, a feeling of belonging, and socializing effects among residents through projects ranging from cultural and educational initiatives to health and management initiatives like the "Eurocitizen" cards.

However, the Eurocities, since they are initiatives with a different approach emerging from local authorities, are European integration projects with a certain novelty and a high level of experimentation. Various case studies of intercity cooperation have underscored that the launch of these projects arouses high expectations [38], and that some award-winning impacts have not been the desired ones, especially regarding the participation of local residents and that of actors which are non-institutional but vital for the legitimation of this model of governance [39–43]. These criticisms bolster the validity of the social approach (also known as the human approach) in the academic debate on cross-border cooperation [31], which stresses the importance of studying socio-cultural dynamics and factors and local perspectives, as well as their inclusion in cross-border cooperation projects. This deficiency in bottom–up governance also contradicts one of the key precepts of local municipal management, as expressed in the Agenda 21 for cities, in which citizen participation is clearly stated as a principle of sustainable development.

4. The Case Study: Guadiana EGCT Eurocity

Various studies discussing the Spanish–Portuguese border have highlighted considerable contrasts along the longest and oldest frontier in the European Union, and not only the differences between the much more dynamic north (Galicia and the north of Portugal) and the south (Andalusia-Extremadura, in the Spanish side, and Alentejo-Algarve, in the Portuguesse side) [44–46]. In particular, the border region of the AAA (Alentejo–Algarve–Andalusia) Euroregion joins the NUTS II of the Algarve, the Alentejo, and the Andalusia, but, more specifically, the focus of the study is between the NUTS III of Baixo Alentejo, Huelva (Andalusia) and the closest area of the Algarve to the border. There is a vertical Spanish–Portuguese border which is marked out by the course of the Guadiana River, intersected in turn by horizontal internal borders and characterized by the homogeneity of the cross-border territory, its ways of life, traditions, historical social ties, and similar economic activities. This horizontal homogeneity can be noted in three distinct areas: the much more dynamic Algrave–Huelva coastline; a mountainous area with most of its economy devoted to the meat industry; and an intermediate area between the county of Andévalo and part of the Baixo Alentejo that suffers from chronic population ageing and a scarcity of sustainable and entrepreneurial activities, both of which make is seen as a "grey area" when compared to the more buoyant coastal-agricultural and mountainous-meat-producing areas.

This area the Guadiana Eurocity, bringing together the three municipalities of Ayamonte, Castro Marim and Vila Real do Santo António, appears as the energizing focal point of the Algarve–Ayamonte coast, as well as a model for the whole of the Algarve, the Alentejo and Huelva. It covers a territory of around 526 km^2, connected principally by the transnational Guadiana bridge, which was built in 1991 with funding from the Interreg program, links Ayamonte to Castro Marim and has recently undergone joint Spanish–Portuguese rehabilitation.

The population of the three towns is scattered across a range of urban centers and freguesias (parishes in the Portuguese part). Vila Real has three parishes (Monte Gordo, Vila Nova de Cacela and Vila Real do Santo Antonio), and Castro Marim has four (Altura, Azinhal, Castro Marím and Odeleite). The population of Ayamonte is spread across its seven population centers (Ayamonte, Isla Canela, Isla

del Moral, Barriada de la Estación, Pozo del Camino, Playa Isla Canela and Villa Antonia), units of population which have no political entity, unlike the Portuguese parishes.

The Eurocity has a total population of over 46,000 inhabitants, with wide disparities in population distribution and density, as Table 1 shows. Thus, while Castro Marim is the largest town in terms of surface area, it has the lowest number of inhabitants, and most of the Eurocity's population is concentrated in Ayamonte (the fourth most populous town in Huelva) and Vila Real do Santo Antonio. Likewise, the Eurocity harbors structural imbalances, one example being the labor market: Unemployment stands at 22% in Ayamonte (2018), as much as three times higher than in the Portuguese towns (at an average of 7% for the Algarve as a whole). In mean incomes, however, neither Castro Marim nor Vila Real do Santo Antonio exceed more than €1000 per head of Ayamonte. Though the area's economy has traditionally been based on the fishing and the canning industries, the rise of tourism in the Algarve has turned the Portuguese towns into holiday resorts. Tourism is also one of the main drivers of development in Ayamonte, though with lesser weight. The holiday industry is one sector where the Eurocity aspires to play an important role, not only through the promotion of the whole area, but also by launching a cross-border brand which can enhance its appeal, complementing already firmly established local government policies.

Table 1. Inhabitants, surface and population density of case-study municipalities in comparison with the Algarve and Huelva.

	N° of Inhabitants	Surface Area	Population Density (inhab./km^2)
Algarve	439,617	4996.79	89.5
Vila Real do Santo Antonio	18,944	61.25	309.3
Castro Marim	6336	323.50	21.1
Huelva	519,932	10,147.8	3454.6
Ayamonte	20,883	141.57	147.5
Eurocity total	46,163	526	

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística [47], Instituto Nacional de Estadística [48].

The Ayamonte–Castro Marim–Vila Real do Santo António Eurocity, more simply known as the Guadiana Eurocity, represents the cutting edge of cooperation in this economically dynamic coastal area, which already has a strong track record of joint work in the Interreg projects and with other key actors such as the municipal chambers of commerce. It was created in January 2013 through the Cooperation Agreement between the towns of Ayamonte and Vila Real, with Castro Marim joining in May of the same year. This agreement was underpinned by a situation made favorable to setting up and cementing regional institutional networks by the AAA (Alentejo–Algarve–Andalusia) Euroregion, created in 2010 by the 28 June 2010 Resolution of (Boletín Oficial del Estado 166, 9 July 2010) and preceded by the earlier twinning of Ayamonte with Vila Real and the historic, now defunct Association for the Development of the Low Guadiana, the ANAS, founded in the 1990s. Both towns, then, have long experience of relationships between institutions, but they also have relationships on a deeper level, with historical, economic and social ties stronger than those between other municipalities across the southern Spanish–Portuguese border. The Eurocity, however, is the most ambitious joint project of the three local administrations, which in 2018 gave it form as an EGTC (Resolution of 7 February 2018, BOE 98, 23 April 2018), thus becoming a legal entity guaranteed by European Union Ruling 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and EU Council. Hence, they have followed the path already taken by other Spanish–Portuguese Eurocities such as Chaves–Verín, created in 2007 and subsequently established as an EGTC in 2013 (Resolution of 17 July, BOE 178, 26 July 2013), the Valencia–Tui Eurocity, set up in 2012, and the most recent, the Elvas–Badajoz–Campo Mayor Eurocity, established in 2018.

This last legal step reflects these local councils' clear political will to improve their population's quality of life, revitalize their area, and reshape their own role as key actors in the AAA Euroregion.

Among their priority spheres of action are health, education, tourism (under the recently coined term of frontier tourism) and mobility, in addition to sports and culture. The legal powers granted by the EGTC have enabled the three councils to jointly initiate direct actions in areas that would normally be the responsibility of regional or national government. For example, they have set out to offer wider healthcare coverage to their residents and to dredge the Guadiana River and make it more navigable through working as a direct lobby in the RIET, which is in turn considered to be the largest European cross-border lobby [49]. These initiatives will test the ability of the three councils to produce socializing effects among the population and install more flexible processes of governance.

Their structure is still in general terms that laid down in the Regulation (European Commission) No 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), with various organs: the General Assembly, representing the highest authority, the Presidency and Vice-Presidency of the General Assembly, the Director, a Steering Committee and a Technical Support Cabinet. As in other Spanish–Portuguese Eurocities (Chaves–Verín, Valencia–Tui) the main offices are in iconic buildings, witnesses to the tumultuous cross-border activities of bygone years, buildings now rehabilitated in both urban and symbolic terms, buildings which are, in this case, old customs houses.

This study analysed the arguments underlying the creation of the Guadiana Eurocity EGTC. The results offer a diagnosis of the Eurocity as a sustainable local development project and as a model for local cross-border governance in a context of complementarity and/or juxtaposition of regional, local and cross-border institutions. An analysis of the discourses of the key institutional and social actors in the cross-border area has also yielded an assessment of the perceived main achievements and initial deficits.

5. Materials and Methods

The diagnostic study of the Eurocity was approached using a qualitative methodology based on a content analysis of the three different data sources and collection techniques. Firstly, a range of documentation relating to the Guadiana Eurocity EGTC project was analyzed: press releases, the regulations for the founding and constitution of the EGTC, and official information from the websites of the three municipalities. A total of fourteen documents from these sources, among different information from the other Spanish–Portuguese Eurocities, were analyzed together. Terms such as "sustainability," "governance" and "participation" were searched for. Secondly, a discussion group and 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with both key informants directly involved in the Eurocity and other experts in cross-border cooperation among public and private institutions in the Algarve and Huelva (local and regional administrations, business leaders, universities, groups of municipalities and chambers of commerce).

An initial list of institutions was drawn up by the research team on the basis of which group of representatives was selected and subsequently invited to a 90-minute group session at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Huelva, in March 2019. The group session was attended by 11 participants—5 from the Portuguese side and 6 from the Spanish—and aimed to discuss different topics on the specific cross-border area (see Figure 1). Regarding the Eurocity, the group agreed on the main topics relating to the current state of the Eurocity and to seek a basic consensus among the various perspectives of the different social actors taking part. Thirdly, in-depth interviews with open and semi structured questions were conducted. The group session also provided participants for the following in-depth interviews of 7 group members. Additionally, in the group session, other potential actors were suggested for interview, leading to a further 7 interviews being conducted with representatives of other institutions. Thus, a total of 14 interviews were carried out, 6 on the Spanish side and 8 on the Portuguese. The use of interviews is frequent in qualitative studies with a focus on the local dimensions of political endeavors; specially in cross-border cooperation, interviews results offer an in depth perspective of

political projects [27,37]. Both in the case of the group session and the interviews, the participants were conveniently informed about the characteristics of the research project in which they were going to participate and the reasons why they had been selected. They were also informed that the designation of their social position would be used in the analysis system, but their own name was not used.

Figure 1. Location of the case study. Source: authors.

The working script was organized around the topics agreed on as central in the group discourse, namely: the perception and actual effectiveness of the Eurocity, its potentials, the bases for the development of these potentials, the social actors related to the Eurocity, and their roles in it. Transcripts of the group session and interviews provided the primary data, which were then analyzed using Atlas.ti (v. 8.15). The method of analysis was oriented towards the structure of the discourse. This structure was built by exploring the co-occurrences of codes within the same units of meaning, such that in the resulting cognitive networks, two codes were linked if they coincided in at least the same unit of meaning. The unit of meaning was established automatically in the same sentence, i.e., the textual content contained between two full stops.

6. Results

The structure of the group discourse on the Eurocity revolved around three central cornerstones, each relatively independent from the other, from an analytical point of view. First, the Eurocity as an appropriate administrative unit which, while not necessarily adding institutional redundancy in the cross-border area of the three towns, was seen to be an entity potentially capable of leading a more local and participatory sustainable development strategy. Second, the Eurocity as a new administrative instance that arouses high expectations while at the same time which has a strong need for financial and managerial autonomy (which was seen to represent one of its potential initial weaknesses). Third, the Eurocity as a development project most rooted in the territory and closest to the common features and needs of the cross-border area.

The first and simplest of these cornerstones, in terms of the number of directly linked nodes (arguments and actors), formed a cognitive network (Figure 2) in which the role of the public administrations was emphasized, specifically the provincial and regional governments on the Spanish side (the Diputación de Huelva provincial government and the Junta de Andalucía, respectively). The

main idea stakeholders associated with these instances had to do with the potential of the Eurocity as a basis for creating a cross-border brand.
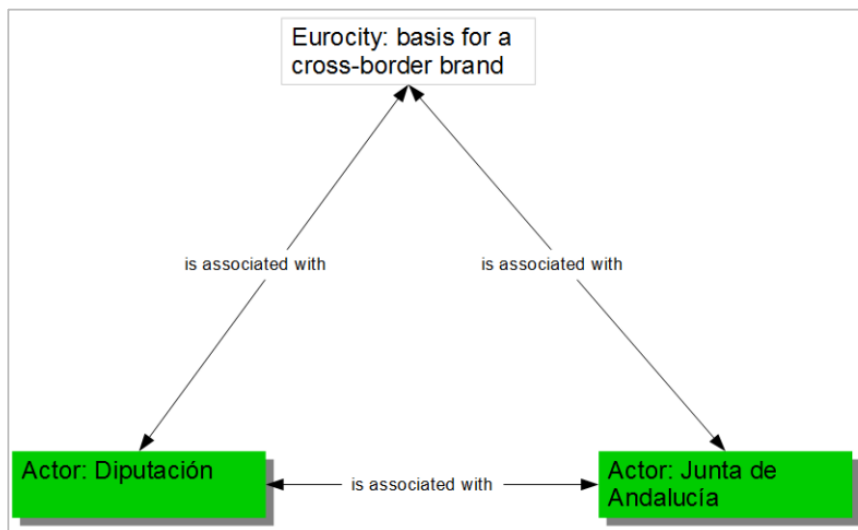

Figure 2. First cornerstone: Eurocity and the role of the main Administrations. Legend: White = arguments; green = actors. Source: authors.

> "This Eurocity could be the main actor at a given time. Logically with the support of other institutions, like the Junta de Andalusia, through the vice-council for tourism; also the Diputación . . . "

The most important focal point of the general discourse on the Eurocity was its common historical and cultural features (as seen later). However, at this point of the discursive structure, certain weight was given to the administrations mentioned above, especially in the area of tourism. All the different actors agreed on the common cross-border aspects of this industry. However, the Diputación, and especially the Junta de Andalucía, were perceived as agents often distant from the real situation of the cross-border area, especially the Andalusian regional government, seen as one of the main sources of bureaucratic hindrances against promoting the potential benefits of the Eurocity.

The second main cornerstone of participants' arguments centered on their perceptions of the Eurocity as a new administrative instance which, apart from local council backing, should have its own economic and human resources (Figure 3).

> "To work properly, the essential thing is that it should have its own structure, separate from the rest of the administrations."

> "For years, we had one specialist from each of the councils working on the Eurocity, and there were times when there were specialists spending 100% of their time on it, and specialists that only spent 50%. As soon as they're not spending 100% of their time on it, their main interest is in the manager they have next to them. Which means that the work you need to do for the Eurocity . . . it didn't get done."

Thus, participants saw a stable foundation for this new administrative instance in a technical support cabinet of specialists on both sides of the border who would be autonomous, well-versed in the local situation and responsible for their own actions. The specialists' workplace was in the town halls themselves, with varying degrees of time commitment. It was thought that European funding and sufficient autonomy in decision-making were essential conditions for the proper working and fulfilment of the high expectations of the new cross-border administration.

"If you don't have a structure, really, you have to be helping it from the outside (…), as has happened up to now; the town councils have to be there helping the Eurocity."
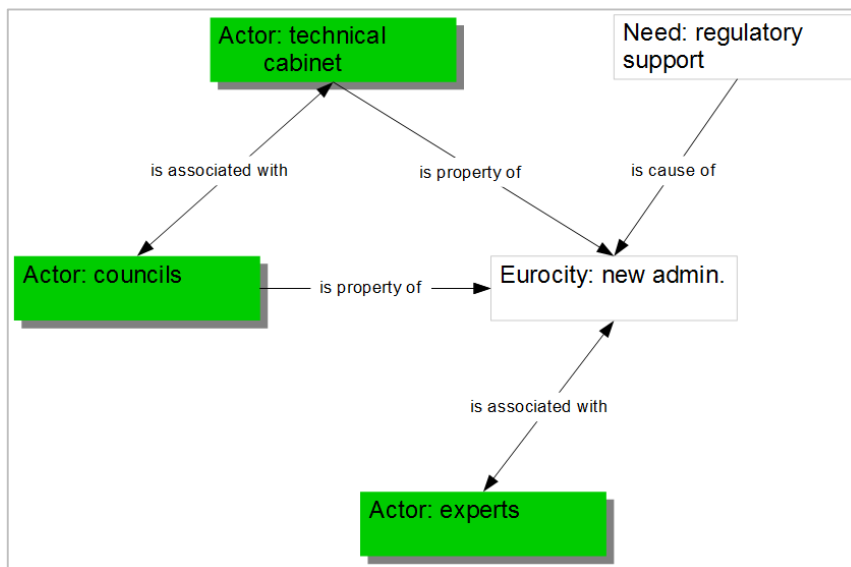

Figure 3. Second cornerstone: Eurocity as a new Administration. Legend: White = arguments; green = actors. Source: authors.

Participants saw stability and regularity in the work of the administrative specialists as important, although they also valued occasional aid from external experts who could give a more strategic perspective.

"The important thing is that, for example, in the set-up of this Eurocity, there should be a professional technical cabinet who're up to date with the actions, with the budgets, with the programs, and who're driving the whole thing, from the strategic plan which at a given time a group of experts can make, etc. The expert groups do their work, but then they go back to dealing with different issues."

Apart from the legal underpinning that has been recently acquired with the creation of the EGTC, participants mentioned the effectiveness of the Eurocity's objectives and the creation of impacts with clear and tangible results, still to be achieved, especially in terms of permanent, wide-ranging actions such as legislative changes for greater convergence and the Eurocitizen card. Participants thought that these initiatives would have across-the-board effects with a strong impact on the local population's daily lives.

"The legal structure (…) is recent (…) and could be advantageous for the population, with the setting up of the Eurocity resident's card, giving everyone access to the social, cultural and sports facilities and use of the facilities of the neighboring town on the other side of the border more easily. There are issues which we have to improve in mobility, the uniformity of the legislation, for there to be more employment mobility."

For various reasons, the third group of interlinked arguments was the most interesting and complex (Figure 4). Firstly, its central node ("informal basis") was what generated the most agreement among the actors interviewed, who concurred that the Eurocity was built on foundations of social, environmental, economic and political relationships with a historical–cultural base and that these transcended the frontier and were associated with common factors; for example: the essential role of the Guadiana River in the local way of life (cultural, religious and gastronomic practices, use of natural

resources, etc.); the common meaning of the territory for its population; the development of sectors such as fishing, canning, tourism; and a range of problems (the management of local employment and unemployment, environmental risks, cultural activity, etc.) and potentials (the promotion of tourism and the economy in general, the protection and showcasing of environmental resources, etc.).
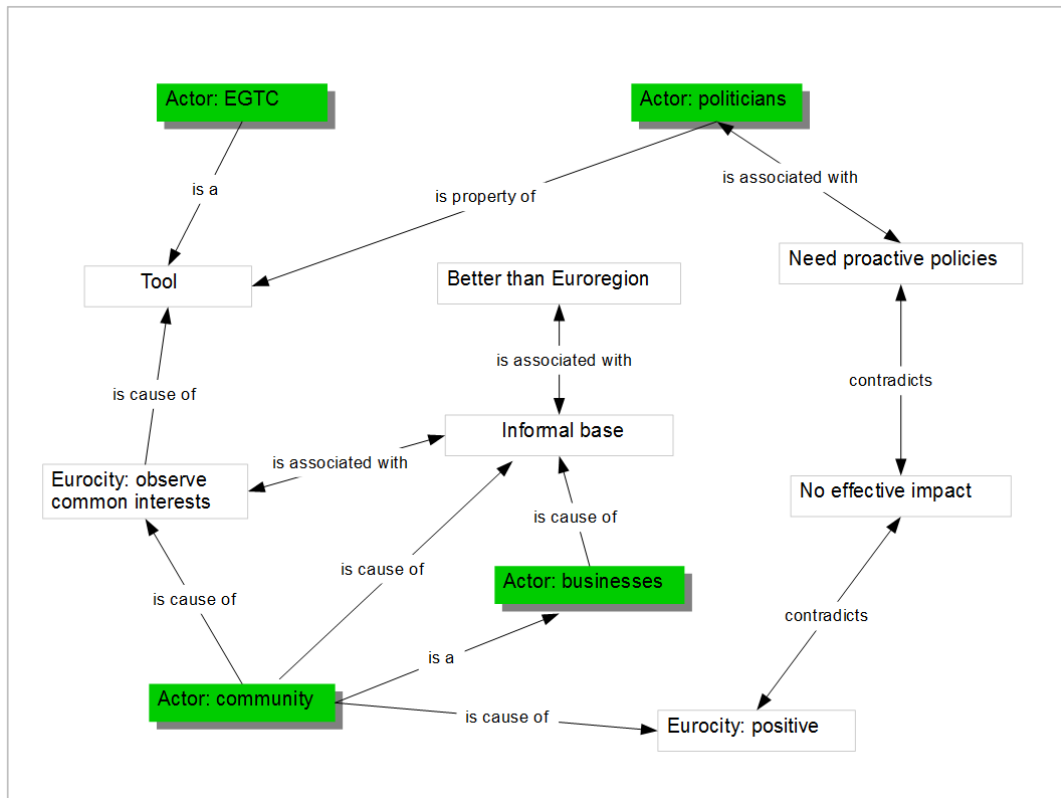

Figure 4. Third cornerstone: Eurocity as adevelopment project rooted in the territory and community needs. Legend: White = arguments; green = actors. Source: authors.

"We have to take on board this informal side, which is working, which is getting more efficient in the business field and we haven't been able to give form to; and which could be a big boost (. . .). This has come out of a boom in activity and interaction between Spain and Portugal which takes place among the local residents, which we haven't managed to do so much on the state level."

"So this type of format makes sense but because below you can be the closest to the natural situation without trying to initiate anything, and in the end it's a territory, a whole, that you can grasp more easily, they're projects that are easier to get under way because of their size, and because they're close to the natural situation you don't have to initiate so many relations."

"We have a very similar culture, our cuisine can be a bit different, but in the end we have the same historical roots."

The second reason was that this historical base gave a deeper meaning to the cross-border territory on the local level, and territorial relationships therefore developed naturally between the same types of actors, namely businesses and the local communities. This grassroots-level daily activity meant that other, geographically larger, political structures of governance had less meaning when compared with the Eurocity (this was the case of the Euroregion, for example).

"So I see that there are four or five Eurocities under way along the whole Spanish–Portuguese border area. What these Eurocities have is that in fact they're organisms on a smaller scale than the Euroregion but they're more active."

"A Euroregion has been created which covers the whole of the Algarve, the Alentejo, Almería and, well, in that the feeling of the border tends to disappear. So I think that the state (. . .) should promote the idea of the border as "la raya," right? "La raya" as the area were the residents get together, do things together, and not as a particularly broad area. I think that one really positive thing (. . .) is what Ayamonte, Villarreal and Castro Marín are doing, right? The idea of the Guadiana Eurocities, I think it will work better than the idea of the Euroregion."

Good practices and success stories from other Eurocities were cited, and the reasons for success were detected in the existence of shared cross-border problems and issues stemming from the local residents' interests. Participants felt that these should be addressed by effective political agreements consistent with these local interests.

"And on specific things. And when we take these examples, successes, that there have been in the north of . . . like in Tuy, Verín and so on . . . When we see how these Eurocities come about (. . .), they come into being because there's an important local problem and the authorities, the politicians have said "we have to deal with this problem." For example, there's a problem with health attendance and it has to be tackled. In other words, when it's become official that you can go to a hospital that's 100 meters away (in another country), with a card, because one politician has agreed it with another (. . .). This has become official. And it's been done through a political decision."

However, one interviewee was skeptical of the Eurocity's potential as a brand name, focusing his/her criticism on the artificial political construction of the brand and expressly referring to the reality which should underlie the new administrative instance's name. This was a common feeling among representatives with a long track record who had seen how political-administrative structures had been created and maintained in the area to seek European Union resources but with no accompanying effect on the daily lives of the local community.

"You can give the name you like to all this, but if there's no reality behind it which holds it up, the name doesn't matter. "Eurocity" doesn't mean anything to me, what does it mean?"

This tendency towards disillusion led to a call for proactive policies which would take on commitments in the areas of management, resources and project deadlines.

"I think that there's no program of activities or schedule with deadlines, with funding from both sides and a political will to develop the area, I think it's lacking. We need more proactive policy."

On this point, the group discourse revealed the third cornerstone of support for the potential of the Eurocity: that it should be seen as an effective tool for managing residents' needs within a framework that would be both logical and efficient for them, independently of whether they were on one side of the border or the other. Once again, the issue of sustainability arose, built on common, stable, predictable and well-established relations of governance as the basis for the sustainable use of resources, or even an alternative model of socio-environmental development, founded on sharing resources and the collective use of those already in existence.

"When you're starting from a problem the residents have, which is a need, a real issue, then this has continuity. And it gives you a basis for a real, stable cooperation. Now, if you're backed up by a supposed political will . . . [referring to policies that are not proactive or statements of intentions that are not effective – author]."

"We've got the golf courses, and there'll be occasions when we'll need two more. Shall we build them? Well, listen, it's not necessary. Let's use the ones we've got, over there, four minutes away, and we're selling it as our own product, part of the Eurocity. So, in the Eurocity we have: six golf courses, three marinas, we've got . . . 25,000 hotel beds. So we're selling this product. We don't need to build more hotels that are going to be closed for seven months of the year!"

The sense of having a "tool" was also reflected in participants' view of the utility of defining and recognizing the status of the Eurocity. Thus the discourse was circular, starting from territorial cross-border needs and commonalities, and arriving at the utility that a strategy based on these commonalities could have. Once again, participants mentioned the comprehensive reach and potential of sustainable local development promoted by these management tools: a type of development with clearly defined key actors (the community, businesses, the local administration and regional, national and European support) based on local resources, problems and needs, with historical, informal, cultural and everyday roots. The fundamental issues centered around governance, the economic and human requirements of management, expert support on the basis of reliable knowledge of the local situation on the ground, and the necessary participatory dimension for the actors who would truly sustain the political and management structures.

"As an example, having a plan for the coast, for climate change, for tourist marketing for one thing, and for another, there are a number of things which we can share, like a shared observatory for information and exchange of information. We already have in the Euroregion and, in the Eurocity, healthcare exchanges between schools; there's already mobility and procedures that work really well, but this has to be constant effort."

"This enables us to take the next step, which is that each region should have its own intelligent specialization strategy (. . .). Having a Eurocity enables me to structure on a more macro level and see effectively where our common interests interact; and it's something specific and a result of decisions of the regions themselves [referring to the most local sphere—author]. When you come to create financial mechanisms, they can't be abstract, they have to take account of these areas [referring to the areas of local economic specialization—author]."

7. Discussion and Conclusion

For some decades now, local sustainable development has been understood only by appealing to the local level and framing it in a multi-actor, participatory, bottom–up methodology [50]. This idea of development fits perfectly with institutional rhetoric on cross-border cooperation. The Eurocities, in turn, seem to represent ideal models for both local sustainable development and governance for second-generation cooperation. Many documents on the Spanish–Portuguese Eurocities refer to this bottom–up cross-border cooperation, based on the participation of social and economic actors and residents, and outline their strategic agendas in this way. It would be difficult for the AAA Euroregion, directed as it is by region-level instances (the Regional Coordination Committees of the Alentejo, the Algarve and the Junta de Andalucía), to carry out initiatives such as the Eurocitizen cards or to undertake actions relating to the socio-cultural features of the cross-border municipalities. Clearly, the local-level proximity of the Eurocity guarantees this type of socializing, second-generation cooperation. The perceptions of its main architects—mayors and experts with a long track record and a strong desire for a shift in the style of local development—underscore the importance of supramunicipal organizational structures as drivers in the transition to sustainability-based socio-economic processes.

The vigor of these projects and their marked local character, counteracting the habitual fatigue induced by projects taking place over a long timescale, promoting local democracy, and prioritizing sustainability, make the Eurocities innovative projects of governance despite their generally similar pattern of development. When comparing the Guadiana Eurocity to its neighbors, we can see that

it has thus far followed a similar path, as they have all been built on the foundation of previously existing institutions such as the Euroregions, working communities, and twinned cities, or yet more distant initiatives like the Elvas–Badajoz Eurocity. The Guadiana Eurocity will largely be funded by the Interreg program, similarly to the other Spanish–Portuguese Eurocities of Chaves–Verín, Tui–Valencia and Elvas–Badajoz (with the project approved by Eurobec in the first 2014–2020 POCTEP call). Since its recent creation, one of its main achievements has been the approval of the project by the second POCTEP call in July 2019, which will allow for a sizeable injection of funds for setting up management and organizational structures in addition to launching a range of initiatives in the spheres of tourism, mobility, the environment, culture and sports.

The results of the diagnostic analysis presented here show the Guadiana Eurocity to be a strategy of local empowerment for a group of municipalities which, after experiencing more geographically wide-ranging cross-border initiatives such as the AAA Euroregion, have set out on a more independent path with expectations of overcoming obstacles to cross-border cooperation, such as political will. For this reason, there were no references in the group discourse to institutional overload in cross-border cooperation, although this has appeared in the academic debate, where the profusion of organisms and the complexity of European integration have been called into question [19].

Throughout the results, three main arguments were found. The first and third stressed the idea of territorial anchoring and its role in providing an interlocutor and mediator in a network of multilevel institutional structures (regional governments, regional coordinating committees, national governments, Euroregions, Spanish so called 'Diputaciones' (provincial governments), groups of municipalities, Portuguese 'camaras municipais,' and town/city councils). Particularly highlighted were the roles of the Eurocity as an institution capable of socializing cross-border cooperation, creating an institutional and social dynamic on a level close to residents' everyday lives, and its potential efficacy in overcoming the occasional indifference to the appropriate use and development of the territory on both sides of the border [51]. All these arguments were, in turn, underpinned by the key concepts of local sustainable development [52], such as the social capital necessary for creating innovative initiatives and institutional social capital among empowering administrations with capacities for political mediation and for shaping a more updated form of cross-border governance, at least on the Spanish–Portuguese border.

The second argument cast a shadow over these nascent experiments in European integration across the Spanish–Portuguese border. In the case of the Guadiana Eurocity, despite the previous experience between twin cities, no great achievements have yet been made apart from the successful application for funding from the POCTEP 2014–2020 program, thus guaranteeing the continuity and consolidation of the project. A first challenge was to determine the extent of this new format and therefore of the political will on a border where a number of development processes have slowed down due to forms of governance which, in the end, act as hindrances to entrepreneurial and/or groundbreaking initiatives [53]. A further challenge was seen in the Eurocity's ability to act as an energizing factor and focus for networking among the social-entrepreneurial and business actors in the cross-border area, guaranteeing bottom–up participation. This institutional endeavor was seen as crucial in a cross-border area with a doubly peripheral situation in territorial–political terms—local actors added the politically peripheral status they perceive with the creation of the AAA Euroregion to the geographically marginality of the Spanish–Portuguese border, an addition which reshaped the border area, widening it to draw in other territories unconnected to the border [31]. This situation reflects the potentialities of an old formula created by local governments that can now reshape their role in the cross-border region AAA. The lack of development strategies that bring together national, regional and local actors is even more significant given that some of the Eurocities' initiatives require the institutional, legal and financial support of a national strategy [54] that incorporate the cross-border dimension without falling into rigid nationalist postures.

Among recent studies on Eurocities across the Spanish–Portuguese border, Castanho et al. [26] note that Elvas–Badajoz does not seem to have achieved any perceptible impact on the local population.

Additionally, when discussing key hindrances, a lack of political will is constantly remarked on [15,55]. Thus, the social dimension of these innovative, cross-border, sustainable projects is still a deficit for their consolidation and essentially for their legitimization, an issue also shared by many projects presented as sustainable in which the absence of local social participation is an obstacle that, although initially imperceptible, is overwhelmingly present. According to Anheier [56], the neglect of the local dimension as the bedrock of sustainable urban development is a constant factor and stems from habits formed under the traditional development paradigm. Thus, the foundations of sustainable urban development (environmental balance, social inclusion and economic growth) are habitually overlooked in the design of public policy due to the traditional development paradigm used.

As a result of our analysis, and complementing previous definitions, we understand Eurocities to be cross-border entities which, after a long period of cooperation founded on a historical, social and economic relationship significant to both cities and their populations, set up a new framework for cooperation. This new structure is seen as being capable of reactivating the political will for creating joint, complementary services, and it is considered to be the form which best represents a form of European cross-border cooperation stressing the local dimension, citizen participation, territorial sustainability and a more balanced territorial development within a common identity. However, apart from establishing themselves in reality, they also need to develop experience and achieve integration into national territorial strategies.

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