

# Activating the potential of territories to achieve inclusive and equitable development

To tackle today's global challenges Enabel assists territories in becoming drivers of change and innovation for sustainable human development.

## Introduction

The global challenges of the 21st century are systemic. The climate emergency, sustainable urbanisation, democratic transitions, migration and technological innovations all bring about changes that exceed the sectoral framework. These challenges are also rooted and experienced at the local level, in territories. In the face of these complex global challenges, ignoring the specific characteristics of each territory risks accentuating inequalities between populations and territories, and weakening the most disadvantaged. It is crucial to acknowledge the diversity of contexts, but above all the potential of territories themselves to anticipate crises, and to be drivers of resilience and development.

A territory is considered here regardless of administrative boundaries. It has three dimensions:

- a geographical natural, managed or built-up area,
- a set of actors and their interrelationships,
- a set of social representations (Moine, 2007).

The integrated territorial approach takes account of the sustainable development potential of the territory. It focuses on the territory's specific features and fosters the creation of solutions that meet the territory's own challenges and amplify its potential. Such approach encourages cooperation and coordination between actors of a territory to achieve common goals. By taking account of the spatial dimension, people and the places where they live can be placed at the heart of development efforts, making these efforts more effective.

Enabel and the Belgian Development Cooperation have accumulated over 20 years' experience in supporting

territorial development. Over the last five years, the country programmes of the bilateral cooperation have seen increased attention and a concentration of actions at territorial and regional levels. They have also promoted more multi-sectoral approaches to tackle the global challenges. The thematic climate programme implemented in the Sahel region is also based on this approach, which is taken up in the Climate Strategy (Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, 2024) and in several policy and strategy notes of the Belgian Development Cooperation. Enabel takes up this approach in its 2030 Strategy among solutions proposed for inclusive and sustainable urban development. Finally, the evaluation of the Belgian approach to fragility recommends "territorialising cooperation and promoting local and national actors" as an appropriate response to the challenges of fragility (Special Evaluation Office, 2024).

## In this context, this position paper aims to:

- Review the key elements of Enabel's integrated territorial approach to development (Enabel, 2023),
- Explain how Enabel assists its local partners in putting this approach into practice,
- Present strategic and operational recommendations for putting in practice the integrated territorial approach in Enabel's projects and programmes.

## Key elements of the integrated territorial approach to development

An integrated territorial approach consists in identifying and developing the potential of a defined territory and its ecosystem. The territory is seen as a territory of governance of human activities, where actors come together to develop projects tackling their common challenges and making the most of the territory's potential. Development is fostered and multiple aspirations are fulfilled by clarifying the relationships and interdependencies between natural elements and institutional, economic and social actors, and by improving how the latter coordinate. This dynamic approach sets out the conditions for territorial governance, to ensure ownership and constant renewal of its development.



This multi-dimensional approach respects the spatially integrated nature of development at local level and strengthens the integration of various sectors of activity at territorial level. However, this is not a closed-system approach. The territorial approach emphasises the economic, social and environmental interdependencies between urban, peri-urban and rural areas. It is not limited to the local level, but takes into account multiple levels of spatial organisation. It links local, regional, national and even international levels (e.g. partnerships between cities, international action by cities and municipalities, diaspora activities).

Promoting development strategies at a territorial level is therefore based on an understanding of the issues raised by a territory and the development of territorial assets in a specific area and at a relevant scale of action that makes sense to a large number of actors in that area. The territory is no longer perceived or experienced as the geographical receptacle in which the policies or programmes designed by the State are implemented, but as a driver of development in its own right (CIEDEL, 2023).

### **Adopting an integrated territorial approach means supporting local actors in:**

- Establishing a shared diagnosis of the territory's potential, challenges and vulnerabilities using an ecosystem approach,
- Developing and clarifying a shared vision for the future of the territory, which is constantly being built and renewed, taking into account the relationships and interdependencies between the natural elements and the institutional, economic and social actors,
- Improving collaboration and coordination between actors to develop the territory's potential,
- Strengthen the role of local authorities in coordinating development initiatives across the territory.

In short, the core of the approach is to create the political, institutional and societal conditions for actors to work together and join forces to develop the potential of their territory in the long term around a shared vision or project. This can happen at various levels: neighbourhood, city, metropolitan area, etc. Territorial governance – both formal and informal – is at the heart of this approach.

### **Lessons learned by Enabel from implementing the territorial approach**

There are many entry points to a territorial approach. The same applies to Belgian international cooperation initiatives.

#### **A holistic approach to the development of secondary cities in Rwanda**

From 2019 to 2024, the Urban Economic Development Initiative implemented an integrated approach to urban development, focusing on the creation of socio-economic infrastructure and climate resilience in two secondary cities

and one satellite city. This approach has enabled these urban areas to be transformed into dynamic ecosystems thanks to targeted infrastructure such as markets, roads and youth centres. By involving the local community, public authorities, the private sector and environmental initiatives, these urban centres have become drivers of sustainable development.

By coordinating the various dimensions of urban development around specific hubs, a shared vision could be established, generating positive impacts on the targeted area and the surrounding community. The success of this approach depends on its anchoring in the existing institutional system, at district level, and on strengthening community participation. The project has fostered a more inclusive dialogue between the authorities, civil society and the private sector, leading to greater synergy in development efforts.

#### **An integrated approach to the sustainable management of a territory's potential in Guinea**

The project, Developing the green economy potential in the Mont Gangan territory (2021-2023) was designed as a territorial pilot project. It focused on protecting the environment while ensuring the sustainable economic development of the natural, human, tourist and cultural heritage of the Mont Gangan territory. The integrated territorial approach allowed for collaboration in villages and communes between farmers' organisations, elected representatives, decentralised government technical services, etc., based on the shared diagnosis and identification of priorities. It supported farmers' groups in their transition to more sustainable farming systems, helped them to use improved stoves and developed business clusters to exploit the potential of tourism. The Mont Gangan participatory actor consultation framework now monitors the integrated management plan for the territory and uses the various strategic, spatial and operational planning tools that exist at local level.

#### **Territorial approach to resilience and social cohesion in Burkina Faso**

Insecurity in Burkina Faso has led to a major humanitarian crisis, with more than 2 million displaced people, mainly women and children, seeking refuge in and around urban areas to gain access to security, services and livelihoods. The bilateral programme launched in 2024 aims to ensure the continuity of basic public services in vulnerable areas and to empower displaced populations and host communities. The integrated territorial approach plays a central role by using simplified diagnostic tools and building capacity to monitor fragility and opportunities for resilience. It also encourages investment in small-scale urban projects to strengthen social cohesion.

At the heart of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, the territorial approach responds to the most urgent needs of populations and supports the creation of spaces for dialogue and territorial governance, enabling local stakeholders to build the resilience of their territory over the long term.

## Enabel's positioning

### Strategic and long-term choices

The choice of an integrated territorial approach is a strategic one. A territorial approach makes sense from the moment a project or programme takes place and is anchored in a specific geographical area, all the more so when several sector-based projects are implemented in the same area. However, the size of this area must correspond to the sphere of influence of the project or programme in order to have an impact and be of added value in accelerating development.

A geographic focus is also a strategy for remaining committed to supporting fragile states when political dialogue with the central authorities is difficult or impossible (e.g. Sahel countries undergoing political transition). Here too, the territorial approach is particularly relevant, to strengthen resilience at local and territorial level.

The choice of a territorial approach arises at the time of country programming in the same way sectoral approaches with multiple anchorage or support for multi-dimensional approaches or transversal themes are chosen. These various approaches can be combined, but must also be based on a strategic choice according to the impact sought and the efficiency of implementation.

Such strategic choice must be made over the long term. The concentration of financial and human investment in a territory or specific territories should last for a decade. This would allow the development or transformative effect to take place through a multi-sector, multi-actor approach that is gradually established and built up. The integrated territorial approach is designed to exceed the term of a project. Finally, to be sustainable, this approach will rely on multi-sector and multi level coordination mechanisms that are already in place or the approach will enable local actors to put such mechanisms in place.

### A progressive and pragmatic approach

Many country programmes are now refocusing on territorial level development. Understanding territorial dynamics is a gradual process. The shared vision often starts with a triggering event linked to a problem or a sector opportunity in the territory. For example, the hydro-agricultural development of a lowland, the opening up of territories, the sustainable management of natural resources, the inter-communal management of resources or services, or taking into account employment areas for socio-economic development (areas of influence of major employment centres). Identifying a unifying potential leads local people to believe that another future is possible and to organise and collaborate with other actors or across sectors.

It is essential to encourage an approach that gradually becomes more integrated through a process of reflection on territorial projects. The territorial approach is therefore put into practice in a pragmatic, non-dogmatic but systematic

way, by gradually developing reflexes for territorial spatial analysis and multi-actor collaboration.

### Relevance in the context of protracted crises

The integrated territorial approach operationalises the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in situations of fragility and protracted crises. It ensures the continuity of public services at local level and their adaptation to rapid shocks and changes in the environment. It supports the promotion of local economies to empower people, especially the most vulnerable. It maintains social cohesion and ensures that people live together within and across communities. Urban centres often face a large influx of displaced people seeking safety, access to public services and livelihoods. They are at the heart of the integrated territorial approach.

In a crisis context, the integrated territorial approach:

- Helps local authorities understand the fragility and vulnerability of territories, and the stresses and potential for resilience,
- Takes account of the territory in all its dimensions: economic, social, migratory, environmental, regional and international,
- Builds on and strengthens existing local assets, structures and actors,
- Encourages alliances and collaboration between local actors around concrete projects that strengthen the resilience of communities and territories,
- Strengthens the coordination of development and resilience through planning capacities, in particular local consultation forums.

### Added value for strategic corridors

A territorial approach to development is also particularly relevant in the context of regional or even continental initiatives that aim to open up territories and that have a strong spatial dimension, like the Transport Corridors of the European Union's Global Gateway project.

Enabel wants to help turn these Transport Corridors into development corridors by strengthening local economic dynamics and foster inclusion of communities, starting from urban centres at the ends and along these corridors. Enabel aims to contribute to economic and human development through the development of transport infrastructure, of economic hubs and production basins, such as ports and mining basins. Enabel is a partner to local authorities and actors, helping them to anticipate social, economic and environmental changes and implement appropriate strategies and plans.

To strengthen the integrated territorial approach to corridors, Enabel:

- Supports participatory multi-sector territorial diagnostics to improve understanding of local dynamics and the issues and opportunities surrounding value chains in production, agro-industry, trade, transport, etc.

- Promotes assistance to and inclusion of local authorities in understanding, anticipating and planning territorial development by means of spatial planning tools, in particular the use of digital technology and geolocalised monitoring of economic development. These tools are part of a multi-scale spatial approach: the city and its hinterland, the region, international city networks. The specific nature of cross-border areas is also taken into account.
- Encourages synergies between sectors and identifies new development opportunities for the territory.
- Strengthens the operation of frameworks for dialogue and consultation at local and regional level, in particular with the private sector. In order to realise the full and sustainable potential of the investments, Enabel promotes coordination and collaboration between actors at various territorial levels (local, regional, national or cross-border).

## Recommendations

To support its partners in putting the integrated territorial approach to development into practice, Enabel recommends the following measures:

### Strategic recommendations

1. Reinforce the strategic choice of the integrated territorial approach in country programming and project and programme design. Even if it is iterative, the territorial approach implies local support and therefore the targeting of a limited number of territories.
2. Give pride of place to context analysis and understanding local dynamics. Certain trends can be pre-identified when the programme is being prepared. However, at the outset, they will require a more in-depth analysis and diagnosis conducted with the local actors themselves, focusing on both the challenges and the potential.

3. Strengthen the narrative on development corridors by emphasising the urban and territorial perspective with European partners and, more broadly, position the territorial approach within the framework of regional projects as a lever for integrating different dynamics, particularly cross-border dynamics.

### Operational recommendations

1. Promote a gradual, iterative approach that starts with 'territory projects' that bring together several actors who, as the projects are implemented, develop a shared vision for the territory's future.
2. Develop monitoring and evaluation systems and measure the impact of the territorial approach, based in particular on the leverage effect of territorial projects, the number of synergies between more and more actors for greater impact, and changes in the dynamism of consultation frameworks at local level.
3. Set up a community of practice around the integrated territorial approach to share experiences and identify, develop and mobilise networks of expertise in areas linked to the approach within the partner countries.
4. Develop participatory territorial observation tools and invest in spatial analysis and the development of mapping and geolocation capacities.
5. Develop tools to strengthen project management and territorial coordination, as well as approaches and tools to strengthen collaboration between actors.

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