

BOOK REVIEW

Rui Alexandre Castanho, *Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) Strategies for Sustainable Development*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2020, ISBN: 9781799825135

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Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) is one of the European Union's key tools when it comes to territorial cooperation and engagement with its neighbours, this becoming even more relevant in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which revealed the critical importance of international cooperation and solidarity. The 2007/2008 crisis triggered the deepest recession since the Great Depression in 1930s; however it appeared equally as a unique opportunity for the international, regional and local actors to promote sustainable solutions to tackle the crisis and to build long-term resilience. The narrative of the Global Recovery Initiative, launched by the European Union in May 2020, revolves around the idea of “*building back better*”, which translates in attaching transformative solutions to the recovery plan, such as the green deal or digitalization. In this context, CBC is seen as a relevant tool for enhancing stability considering its role which involves supranational process, but also regional ones. The potential with regard to infrastructure building and planning frames CBC as a practical tool to promote sustainable development goals (SDGs) and transformative solutions. CBC supports sustainable development along EU's external borders in order to generate lower discrepancies in living standards, thus addressing common challenges alongside the borders (Țigănașu *et al.*, 2020).

In this context, the Rui Alexandre Castanho's book *Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) Strategies for Sustainable Development* provides a timely contribution towards a better understanding of how the CBC might facilitate the promotion of sustainable goals in Europe. The rich investigation conducted by the author and his team into the various technicalities of the link between CBC and sustainable development, stimulates further reflection in research. From spatial data infrastructure to the border regions identity, the book approaches a variety of topics, which acts as a reminder of the complexity of the CBC topic. The practice of CBC is not specific only to Europe; it can be encountered in all the continents, creating a network of cooperation between international, regional and local actors (Dominguez *et al.*, 2015).

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The book advances the research on SDGs and is promoting the need to further look into the opportunities that CBC could provide in this area. As the global community was not fully successful in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 – with an agreed deadline in 2000 - the SDGs agenda set in 2015 replaced the MDG, shaping a new approach and global narrative towards tackling the challenges which threaten the world, such as poverty, climate change or conflict. More than that, the pandemic context highlighted a dramatic fragmentation and lack of effective coordination between countries, this strengthening the relevance of CBC for international cooperation. In addition, there are still many issues related to the management, especially as the political factors might question the aspect of transparency and accountability (Rabé *et al.*, 2013; Gualini, 2017). Therefore, despite the urgency of the challenges, the old ones are still on the table.

The main aim of the book is to help improve the understanding of the dynamics and patterns linked to the CBC regarding how it can support the promotion of sustainable development. The book provides a balanced mix between theoretical insight and the practice on the ground. The author is honest and realistic towards the CBC implications for the promotion of SDGs, approaching a balance between opportunities, risks and limitations. More precisely, Rui Alexandre Castanho's perspective is twofold: by looking at how the CBC could influence the sustainable development, but also at how it cannot, by openly underlining its limits, it stimulates the need to further find new ways on how to break the current analytical boundaries. The author highlights the need to rigorously study and analyze the borderland territories - as they are complex areas, but also very fragile. The opportunities and challenges of CBC pave the way for shaping new approaches towards cooperation, by integrating the SDGs into the equation, as well. Considering its multidisciplinary facets, the author together with his team, invites readers to approach the SDGs in the context of CBC from different perspectives. This idea might explain the apparent fragmentation of the book, considering its diverse interdisciplinary feature. But this is actually its strength: by centralizing a wide range of topics, issues and processes related to CBC. Based on the overall mix of topics, the book is especially valuable for policymakers and experts in sustainability.

The book provides an excellent stock taking exercise of the main trends in CBC, the challenges and limitations of integrating the SDGs in the current context. The book's approach is even more relevant as it promotes the idea of adapting the CBC tools for a greater effectiveness and cohesion. As the international community is facing challenges, from terrorism to political crisis and from geopolitical uncertainty to natural disasters, the book advances the idea of promoting consistent and integrated strategies towards CBC.

The book is organized in 15 chapters, which cover key topics related to achieving the SDGs, such as biodiversity policies and strategies accessibility, circular and green economy, connectivity and transportation, environmental rights and legislation, migratory fluxes, strategies, renewables energies, sustainable

planning and development. The geographic focus of the book is diverse, providing case-studies on regions from Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Czech Republic, but also beyond the European continent, in India and Pakistan or Brazil and Uruguay. The author himself recognized that many authors conducted similar research in these topics before (Castanho, 2017; Spirkova and Ivanicka, 2009; Gualini, 2017; Santos et al, 2019). However, we argue that due to the Covid-19 implications, his book gained an additional *momentum*, taking into account the narrative aligned around the need to provide transformative solutions to the global challenges, with the green element at the core.

The first chapter is focused on spatial data infrastructure and its benefits for sustainability, which analyses the project OTALEX, elaborated by Portuguese and Spanish enterprises, for developing a joint cartography which integrates environmental, social and economic indicators. The chapters 2-7 are focused on various issues specific to European regions, bringing an interdisciplinary contribution to the research; from demography and multi-level governance to carbon adjustments. All these chapters bring a set of relevant case-studies, highlighting what works and what doesn't in the context of CBC specific cases, such as the Southern Europe, the Polish-Slovak cross-border projects or Serbia-Romania. The chapter on demography is contributing to the existing academic literature, which argues that the elements of accessibility, connectivity, and transportation should approach the context of border population, which are also keys to achieve SDGs (Knieling and Othengrafen, 2015; Vulevic *et al.*, 2019; Gamon and Gómez, 2019)

The chapter 8 is approaching the topic of US-China trade war and its impact on the European economies. The geopolitical dimension made its way into the European narrative gradually, as the increasing uncertainty pushed the EU and Member States to be more salient when it comes to defending their interests. The analysis provided by the authors is a reminder that the global economy is strongly interdependent; in this context, CBC might be affected by geopolitical processes.

Chapter 9 presents an interesting case of a city from Czech Republic, divided by a border; this represents a typical example for which CBC was created. The authors focused on marketing strategies and on how cultural institutions might contribute towards avoiding a further divide between the two sides. A similar issue was approached in the 10th chapter, which focuses on the efforts conducted by India and Pakistan towards cooperation in the area of peace, in order to promote sustainable development goals. The analysis links the idea of security with development, having a modest, but relevant attempt to consider the possibility of breaking the silos between the two dimensions.

The next three chapters (12, 13 and 14) are dedicated to how to design strategies towards promoting a sustainable development. As cross-border regions are subject to geopolitical connotations, the authors underlined the need to think strategically when it comes to design CBC policies.

The topic of the last chapter is a strong reminder to consider the phenomenon of nationalism and independent movements within the European Union. The subject of territorial identity is a sensitive one, and as the last decade has shown, it has destructive potential for regional and even continental fragmentation. Therefore, the authorities involved in CBC should not shy away from integrating elements which were avoided in the past, especially related to the political and geopolitical realm, as today's reality clearly highlights the need for this approach.

There are areas where the book did well, while some areas and issues were not addressed in sufficient detail. However, the most important aspect is that a gap between the book's rhetoric and the way the research focus is displayed across the chapters can be seen. Precisely, as the book claims to deal mainly with strategies for integrating the SDGs in CBC, there are many chapters which are clearly shifting away from the main focus of the book. Some might expect a book entirely dedicated to theoretical aspects when reading the title' however, the book gathers chapters on various topics related to CBC in a more general manner. Despite that, approaching the idea of strategies in the context of CBC is a relevant topic, considering the heavy uncertainty, an endemic feature of the current international order.

As the world is facing many challenges, actors such as the European Union and other International Organisations are pushed to actively engage in promoting SDGs. What is different compared to the last two decades is that, the current period is dominated by a salient narrative with a transformative agenda, which especially revolves around priorities such climate change, green transformation or digitalisation. As Covid-19 might push more than 100 million people back to extreme poverty, while climate change might be responsible for an additional 65-130 million, the SDGs are strongly securitized. Therefore, designing salient strategies and learning how to consider approaching threats from a multidimensional and multidisciplinary perspective for CBC, including the geopolitical dimension, is a must for any policymaker working in the field. The narrative on how to promote SDSs, such as green economy or digitalisation should be mainstreamed, for a more cohesive cooperation among the partners involved in CBC projects, as well as for the broader public. Therefore, further research on this topic is encouraged.

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