

Not everyone in any case, I expect, would see the harmonisation of planning systems as a desirable objective but the borrowing of 'good practice' from abroad would tend to lead to some convergence in planning in different countries. There is something of a debate on this at the moment in the context of discussions about the impact of the European Union on planning systems in Europe. The literature referred to in this chapter is largely to cross-national studies involving countries in Europe. Some studies are cross-national in the sense that they compare aspects of the national planning systems in two nations (Booth et al. 2007; Farthing 2008). Much recent work, however, has involved a comparison of cases *within* different nations in Europe, rather than a comparison of nations *as* cases. For example, Herrschel and Newman (2002) were interested in the nature and workings of city regions in a sample of cities in Germany and England.

## Research purposes and research questions

There is a range of descriptive and explanatory purposes in comparative research, and 'what' and 'why' questions are as appropriate to comparative research as they are to research within a country. Individual pieces of research often attempt to answer both.

### Descriptive questions

Couch et al. (2003) have aims which are both descriptive and explanatory in relation to their research into urban regeneration in European cities. Their descriptive aim is to provide 'a comprehensive and informed presentation of urban regeneration problems and policies in a number of European cities' and the editors 'examine the similarities and differences in the processes of urban regeneration between different situations (p. 4).

Much comparative research describes itself as exploratory. This may be because the writer claims that there is not much evidence about policy in different countries. But another reason, and a strong theme in the literature from the 1980s (Masser and Williams, 1986) and again more recently in the 2000s (Knieling and Othengrafen, 2009) is that the 'institutional context' means paying attention to the importance of understanding differences in planning 'culture' between countries whilst emphasising the difficulties of doing so. Booth (1996: vii) points out the difficulties he had in the early 1980s in understanding French planning: 'I attempted to