

Developing organizing capacity in polycentric European regions

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1. Introduction: the assumed advantages of regional planning in polycentric clusterings of cities

The Discussion Paper for Topic 2 (DPT2) focuses on polycentricity as a policy concept for spatial development. This concept has become increasingly popular in spatial policies on a variety of spatial scales, ranging from the continental (European) to the local scale. Although the meaning of the concept and the objectives of the policies differ between these scales, it is in general considered a means to achieve a more balanced spatial pattern of development and a higher level of international territorial competitiveness by the area at stake. This response paper deals with the concept on the regional scale, more specifically with polycentric urban regions that can be defined as a collection of historically and administratively distinct cities located in rather close proximity, at approximately commuting distance, interspersed with smaller towns and villages. This type of polycentric region is most widespread in Northwest Europe, for instance the Randstad region in the Netherlands, the RheinRuhr region in Germany and the 'Flemish Diamond' in Belgium. Their cities are at best intermediate in size to the international standard and these regions lack a 'primate city' in the sense that none of its cities dominate significantly, neither in size nor in economic, political and cultural importance (Meijers, Romein & Hoppenbrouwer, 2003).

Research suggests that their individual cities and towns are on the road to become part and parcel of a larger functional entity on the regional scale. Against this background, regional planners, policy makers and other stakeholders often assume these polycentric regions to be a more appropriate scale for policies to strengthen territorial competitiveness than the scale of its individual cities and towns. Co-operation and co-ordination by these places, and with representatives of higher administrative tiers and non-public actors in joint planning and action is considered advantageous for competing successfully with metropolitan agglomerations like London and Paris. The assumption is that joint planning schemes may generate economies of scale that are similar to those of these agglomerations but avoid the diseconomies of scale that harm the competitiveness of these agglomerations.

This response paper explores some potentialities and constraints for a polycentric approach of planning and action. The key-term to typify the constraints is the impotency of polycentric regions to develop regional organising capacity. The paper concludes with a strategy that may improve this organising capacity. The paper is based on an INTERREG II-C project (URBANET) that compared four polycentric urban regions: RheinRuhr, the Randstad, the Flemish Diamond and Central Scotland. Although this project finished about three years ago, its results have value for any polycentric urban region in Europe as well as territorial development strategies in countries and on the European scale. For instance, the development of 'global economic integration zones' outside the Pentagon – as proposed in the ESDP - will often involve new clusterings of neighbouring cities.

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2. Potentialities of regional co-operation and action

Many planners with a regional scope assume that policies that aim at the strengthening of economic competitiveness at the scale of the individual city leaves opportunities unutilized that become (more) obvious in case of a regional point of view. The research findings of the EURBANET project identified three potentialities of regional co-ordination and action in polycentric urban regions.

1. Pooling resources

The first potentiality of a regional approach of planning is the possibility to effectively pool resources and assets that are spread across the polycentric region. This provides greater external economies for businesses since these have access to larger pools of labour, services, suppliers and customers than in any of its individual urban centres. Also, consumers have access to a wider range of services and amenities that are distributed across the urban centres of various size. To accomplish this pooling, planning on the regional scale should focus, among other things, on improvement of intra-regional accessibility. Faster and more convenient connections, by car and public transport, between urban centres are crucial both to generate access to a broader supply of resources and assets to key-stakeholders for regional development and to create favourable conditions for an effective demand for these services in regional centres of various size.

2. Balanced complementarities of urban centres

Next to this increase in ‘critical mass’ through the pooling of resources, the increase in variation and differentiation of assets in the form of complementarities between the cities is a second potentiality of joint planning. This is a way to balance local shortages of resources and services on the larger regional scale (see also the paper by Meijers at this conference). Complementarity in assets of the various cities results from specialisation, which in turn is made possible because of the larger critical mass through the pooling of resources. Planning should focus on complementary functional specializations of urban centres so that the region as a whole offers a broader package of (rapidly accessible) higher quality metropolitan services to businesses, households, consumers, and workers. These services may be advanced producer services; educational and R&D institutes; specialized types of retail; recreation, leisure and cultural facilities; and last but not least residential and business environments. As a whole, this geographical distribution of specialised services creates a highly competitive environment for businesses, skilled professionals and regional consumers.

3. Optimizing spatial diversity

The third potentiality of regional planning is the improvement of the quality of open spaces in the region. The current tendency towards dispersed and unbalanced patchworks of all kinds of “constructions, topographies and spaces, with elements of urban as well as rural landscapes that develop in the formerly unencumbered open landscapes of many polycentric configurations” (Schmitt et al., 2001: 18) means a downgrading of their spatial diversity. This must be judged negatively from the competitive point of view since it harms the variety of rural landscapes across short distances, which is considered one of the basic competitive advantages of polycentric urban regions over single large metropolitan agglomerations. What is more, it is not only the quality of open space but also the vitality of (inner-)cities and the variety of urban scenery that are at danger. Allowing some deconcentration of urban functions that depend on a high level of accessibility by car is to the advantage of the competitiveness of the region, but uncontrolled urban sprawl should be avoided. This requires co-ordinated policy-making from a regional rather than a local perspective.

3. Constraints for regional co-operation and action

The benefits of co-ordination of local planning and policy-making on the regional scale have been acknowledged by stakeholders in all four polycentric urban regions that are examined in

EURBANET. Nevertheless, examples of elaborated and effectively implemented frameworks for co-ordinated planning and action are scarce. The answer to the question why this is so lays in particular in their limited regional organizing capacity. EURBANET has revealed three general constraints that set limits to the building up of this capacity.

1. Lack of functional rationality

The further a polycentric urban region is functionally tied together and integrated, and hence, the more actors have to maintain relations throughout the regions to fulfil their needs, the greater the need for regional organizing capacity. It is often assumed, partly based on empirical observations, that cities, towns and suburban centres are part and parcel of larger functional entities. This is often represented by an assumed merging of functional markets, particularly labour, housing and services from local scale towards a single regional scale. However, functional markets do not solely operate on the single level of the polycentric region as a whole. The spatial scope and orientation of some types of interactions may coincide with the region, but for most types the region is either a too large or too small scale. Also, strong relationships may exist with cities further away. This calls for selectivity in the scope of issues for regional co-ordination. Difficulties in developing regional organising capacity in polycentric urban regions often relate to a lack of a spatial logic behind such a development. Key actors sometimes perceive the functional ties with the neighbouring other cities too limited.

2. Institutional fragmentation

The above implies that regional planning of spatial issues calls for an approach that is formulated and implemented at multiple scales rather than at only one. Hence, co-ordination in polycentric urban regions requires planning professionals to adopt a view that puts emphasis on co-operation across administrative tiers. Additionally, an increasing number of issues of spatial planning are preferably addressed through a governance rather than a governmental mode, i.e. through co-operation across public, private and organised interest groups, thereby taking into account that different issues call for different alliances with different spatial competencies and different life spans. Clearly, putting such multi-level governance into practice is a complex task, even if politicians and local planners agree on its usefulness. There may be a lack of understanding on how it works. Besides existing formal institutional frameworks are often too static and hierarchical to recognise and deal with this complex, multi-scalar interplay. Fragmented responsibilities may also lead to a lack of 'regional' leadership, which, however, is crucial in networks without a formal hierarchical structure.

3. Lack of regional identity

For joint planning and action in polycentric urban regions there appears to be a clear need to establish common and shared interests. This is far from self-evident as there are many fields where the interests of places and stakeholders in a polycentric urban region are different or even opposite. In particular the areas (cities) that are better off in certain matters (economic growth, employment, social tensions) have little interest in adopting regional policies that may adjust this situation. Here, the feeling of belonging together and the perception of the polycentric urban region as an entity are at stake. First, a common culture that refers to the existence of a shared history and shared values, norms and beliefs in a region eases regional networking. On the other hand, the lack of such cultural issues or, worse, sharp divides on cultural issues impose barriers to co-operation. EURBANET illustrates that cultural divides can be present in polycentric urban regions even if their size is relatively small, hence hampering the building of regional organising capacity. In addition, the studied regions lack a clear regional identity that may help to achieve common, functional or strategic goals (Faludi, 1999). Regional symbols, institutions, media or political parties that may have shaped this identity are rare.

4. Strategies to promote a joint planning in polycentric regions

Both the existing institutional frameworks and the culture and identity in the EURBANET regions raise only limited optimism on the feasibility of a regional perspective of planning and policy making that copes with a multi-scalar and multi-actor complexity. The institutional frameworks are rather static, hierarchical and mostly confined to subsections of the regions only, and common regional cultures and identities are weakly developed. This is not to say that such a perspective is impossible to accomplish, but its promotion has to start at very initial stages of co-operation and require a long term. EURBANET proposes a three-step strategy to promote a regional planning perspective and implement a regional approach.

1. Start small

The building up of mutual understanding, trust and respect by stakeholders is crucial for the development of a sustainable concept of the polycentric region and repetitive regional co-operation and planning based on it. This is, however, also a slow and difficult process. It is very helpful to start the three-step strategy with projects that give stakeholders the experience of effective and successful co-operation at low costs. It is important to identify and formulate concrete projects that deal with strategic issues of development and competitiveness but have a limited scope, are easy to organise, and yield much winners and as little as possible losers.

2. Do more difficult projects

After the small start, the step-wise approach advocates to address more complicated issues. Once the concept of the region as a co-operative vehicle for planning has taken some root and both mutual trust and the regional discourse have been strengthened due to successful small-scale co-operation, more difficult projects that involve more distributive aspects and trade-offs rather than just win-win situations can be placed on the agenda. Not only progress on these issues itself, but also the building of further understanding, consensus and eventually the formulation of consistent policies are served by the creation of loose issue-based networks of appropriate stakeholders, from public administrators to private business organisations. Preferably these stakeholders share interest, but conflicting interests would not necessarily put a time bomb under the network. Irrespective of the kind of actors involved, it is essential that their membership is active, not passive.

3. Foundation of a regional agency

The final step is the foundation of a regional agency that not only deals with certain issues or specific short-term projects but also has a more general scope. This agency should be a platform for governments, together with other public and semi-public institutions and private organisations, to join forces. Its roles and tasks are very diverse. Direct involvement in regional development by formulating, co-ordinating or monitoring projects is most obvious. In addition, it may also prepare strategic spatial visions to strengthen the region's competitive position in both national and international perspectives, and act as interlocutor for the national government on regional issues. The creation of a new politico-administrative layer is not recommended for the danger of an enlarged bureaucracy as well as the proven institutional resistance to change. Regional policy- and decision-making that comes partly in the hands of non-elected public bodies and private stakeholders on the other hand, lacks democratic control and legitimacy. Perhaps a good solution is the foundation of a formal regional agency in which representatives of existing and democratic governmental layers meet, next to an informal platform involving a wide variety of public and non-public actors in which regional issues can be discussed and debated more freely. To stimulate a bottom-up development of platforms for regional co-ordination, the national government or perhaps the European commission could make financial commitments to cities and regions more dependent on the extent to which local plans are coordinated regionally. Both last recommendations seem to work well in the Netherlands, in particular the Randstad.

5. Conclusion

The response paper reflects both the enthusiasm and the scepticism that the related concepts of polycentric urban region and urban network have received so far. The enthusiasm relates to the (assumed) benefits of regional planning over a series of self-containing local policies. It also holds benefit over a top-down approach by the national state. Scepticism however, still exists and is related to the unwillingness and impotency to cooperate. Many cities prefer competition on issues where they consider themselves better equipped and many are not convinced that regional planning is on balance advantageous to them. On a more general level, Capello (2000) for instance criticises the basic assumption that co-operation within regional urban networks stimulates growth and is advantageous to each city, community and interest group for reasons of a lack of both theoretical and empirical knowledge. Much more governmental action and empirical research is still required to let the concept of polycentricity be more than just rhetoric by regional planners.

References

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