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on Quality of Urban Life and Polycentric Development**

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE EUROPE
Redefining the Public Interest for Territorial Development in the UNECE Region

**Response paper by Judith Ryser, rapporteur
on Topic II on Polycentricity and its Ability to Improve Functional Integration**

Devil's advocate questions about polycentricity

Before focusing on governance it is necessary to raise some context defining questions and to position the role of research - a legitimate undertaking at a research conference.

Is polycentricity the holy grail? How do we know? Why should it be able to deliver global competitiveness, economic growth and social territorial cohesion better than any other system? Is it at all possible to deliver global competitiveness, economic growth and social territorial cohesion simultaneously? Or are these aspirations of market led democracies mutually exclusive? Who claims to know and with what evidence?
Should research be called upon to answer these questions?.

Is it pertinent to advocate a blanket application of polycentricity throughout wider Europe (as proposed in the ESDP: European Spatial Development Perspective and CEMAT guiding principles) or would it be wiser to set up trials with consenting participants – public governance, private business, and crucially recipients - who would decide together on best possible outcomes and analyse the results before polycentricity is heralded as a universal model?
Could there be a role for action research?

Is there a Plan B if the polycentric ideal fails? Should alternative experiments be conducted alongside the polycentric concept for comparison? How are its success and failure monitored? What are the costs involved in such an experiment and its possible failure? Who should foot the bill? With what legitimacy is failure imposed on its recipients?
Should this be entrusted to comparative empirical, statistical research and scenario building?

What are the criteria of successful polycentricity and who defines them? How do they compare with characteristics of 'successful' monocentric development? Does polycentricity apply everywhere regardless of existing physical, economic and cultural conditions? At what scale does polycentricity produce results?
Could qualitative social science research provide some answers?

Who should be in charge of managing and maintaining a polycentric urban structure? Can this be done realistically from a purely political administrative vanguard or do other stakeholders have to play an inherent part together with civil society?
Could scientific surveys and interview based research provide some guidance?

'Mixed development' as proxi to understanding polycentricity

Let as look at the notion of 'mixed development', a current planning panacea, as a proxi to unravel some of the very complex issues of polycentric development.

Does mixed development mean *social mix of residents*? And would it be legitimate to achieve this through social engineering? Would it apply to a small neighbourhood (e.g. ten homes?), an urban quarter (e.g. two thousand homes), a district, or at city level in a polycentric settlement pattern?

Does it mean a *mix of activities*, housing, workplaces, leisure and entertainment facilities? Is it not truly a matter of social and economic access rather than physical structure? When measuring mixed development where are the boundaries drawn? If it takes place on a waterfront, for example, can such a public realm be annexed into the mixed development? At what scale is mixed development supposed to work and according to what criteria?

Even if the perfect mixed development can be designed, built and put to use, *time has an arrow*. While requirements, expectations and uses are changing, how can such a mixed development be sustained over the long term? . An example of dynamic transformation are the changes which English New Towns have undergone since their inception after the second world war, alongside the change over time of planning philosophies and ideologies.

Reality shows that *people* and their behaviour tend to stand in the way of untested policies and their self-confident *assumptions*. For example, mixed development is assumed to reduce traffic because people are expected to live near their workplaces. What is the evidence for that? What are people's motivations to move house or jobs? Do they wish to live near their often precarious workplaces or do they choose proximity to a good school or a golf course and how long for? These are financial and fiscal considerations, social and family issues. The list of people's reasons for choosing locations is endless and personal. Can they be forced or cajoled into complying with public physical development policies or are their decisions out of reach of spatial planning controls? Incentives have a tendency of being short lived and not very reliable. People tend to trust their own resources and networks to secure a safe home and, more generally, the best quality of life they can afford.
Isn't there a case for monitoring and futures research?

Why try to tame spatial development before understanding it?
the usefulness of conceptual research

Here we explore the potential usefulness of research as opposed to resorting to unchallenged acquired truths for policy development and intervention

Received wisdom
Despite probing questions, it remains tempting to hang on to *'received wisdom'*. Only when long term dysfunctions are becoming embarrassingly apparent or when unexpected exogenous changes are demanding political action are new departures sought. This is when new ideas or theories have the greatest opportunity to seduce and sneak into the inner sanctum of governance. It is their chance of becoming the next set of unchallenged 'received wisdom'. [cf. French response paper on a succession of social housing policies[1]]. What unites conviction politicians and planners is their liking of a single track approach to problem solving. They are keen followers of 'monorail thinking' without anticipating adverse effects.

To name but a few examples from recent history, modernist segregation of physical functions engendered social segregation; free standing buildings, especially tower blocks designed to provide light and fresh air led to social anomie and sometimes even their demolition; concentration of offices in city centres deprived them of urban life and added to urban sprawl; subsequent post-modern reversals advocating compact cities and a return to urban living led to gentrification and scarcity of affordable housing for service workers; densification suited land owners but may be the seed of the slums of tomorrow.
Could historical and evaluation research assist more informed decision making ?

Physical inertia and social will
Two aspects are systematically ignored by the *'monorail approach'* to spatial development.
The first neglected aspect is inertia, *inertia of the human settlements fabric* as well as *inertia of vested interests* and their resistance to change [e.g. Unbuilding Cities[2]] despite popular fear of too much and too radical urban change. Even external events, be they natural or man made disasters, do not guarantee swift innovation of either the urban fabric or ways of life.
Conversely, the second aspect are people's own *'free' choices*, much revered by global capitalism and the liberal market economy which seems to dominate most European-wide institutions at present. Research shows that private corporate or individual choices have greatly influenced the transformation of the living environment, independently of strategies imposed from above or interventionist policies generally [e.g. Enduring Innocence[3]].

Understanding the spatial structure of human settlements
Back to understanding the spatial structure of human settlements, it could be argued that any multi-functional city, with or without spatially separated functions is polycentric. Revisiting Benevolo[4], it is clear that far back in history, Ancient Egypt separated the living from the dead, the Ancient Greek city encompassed distinct spaces for separate functions, as did the Roman city. The Ottoman Empire ruled through a dual civil and military structure. More recent examples are given in the discussion paper on polycentricity[5]. Baku may be construed as one of the earliest planned polycentric metropolitan regions [cf. Azerbajan response paper[6]]. Inherent in both inter- and intra-urban polycentric multifunctional physical structures are the combination of segregation and interdependence. However, cohesion is less obvious to detect.

It is clear that physical structures do not exist in a vacuum. Social organisation and ways of life are underpinning all of them. Urban form, broad physical structures and their evolution are intertwined with those who create, manage and use them and give

them meaning. This is reflected in the social and institutional setting of power relations illustrated by Polanyi's.[7] work. Even theories specialising in physical form acknowledge their link with social and political power structures.

Central place theory about hierarchy of city systems relates to a pyramidal power structure. The more functions, the larger the population, the greater the regional and local GDP the mightier are political powers and the weight of the establishment. The *inertia of vested interests* may equal that of physical spatial structures. An analysis of polycentrism in Europe based on data from 27 countries classifies the degree of cohesion, aka polycentricity, of various European regions [cf. response paper from ESPON, European Spatial Planning Observation Network, Luxembourg[8]]. It assesses their potential to improve their position further according to selected criteria: transport connections, higher education, decision making, administration, tourism and industry. It is clear that the existing concentration of urban functions and economic clout, due to accessibility and favourable profiles reinforces the existing advantage of the regions in the 'Pentagon', encompassing London, Paris, Milano, Munich and Hamburg. Other regions may improve their position, but at what cost to the European space as a whole and its global competitive position. This question exposes the contradiction between the liberal and the social market concepts and the power relations between their respective protagonists. Can they resolve their differences at the supra-national level and with what governance, the key to the implementation of polycentricity.
Is there a case for conceptual research and theory building?

Governance

Governance is a concept used as 'Jack of all trades', especially by existing governments. It obscures the effective options of control and command of the public sector which is increasingly penetrated by private sector approaches through public private partnerships - another loose notion - and challenged by public participation – yet another ambiguous term. Here we attempt to clarify these notions and their applicability.

Definitions of governance
Traditional dictionary definitions confound governance with government[9] while dynamic encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia make a distinction between government and governance.[10] Closest to traditional thinking, the World Bank definition of governance refers to "the exercise of political authority and the use of institutional resources to manage society's problems and affairs". In the corporate sector, *fair governance* amounts to "mechanisms in which executives or agencies respect the rights and interests of stakeholders in a spirit of democracy." Other definitions provided by the public to Wikipedia conceive governance as "the use of institutions, structures and authority and even collaboration to allocate resources and coordinate or control activity in society or the economy". A distinction is made between governance and both politics and administration, although power is seen as a basic ingredient of governance and politics alike. The three main types of governance include global, corporate and project governance.

The characteristics of *good governance*, regardless of who carries it out are participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability. What they aim to achieve is to minimise corruption, include minority views, and give a voice to

the most vulnerable in society in decision making. Overall, good governance can be construed as an idealistic or humanitarian perception of the exercise of power. Nevertheless, it seems to have entered mainstream institutions such as the World Bank which grounds its interventions on reform conditions towards good governance.

Practice of governance
Three practices of governance are identified: hierarchic, market led and networked. They include top-down methods involving governments and state bureaucracies; the use of market mechanisms resorting to competition to allocate resources while operating under government regulation; and networks involving public private partnerships and the collaboration of community organisations. The shift between these methods of governance reflects societal changes which can be noted throughout the UNECE region. All these notions of governance and their application imply some underlying democratic principles.

Governance and planning
Related to spatial development recent political debates show that consolidation of power and the seats of power raise suspicion about excessive concentration; conversely they are also used as an argument in favour of global competitiveness. Polycentricity is the current attempt to reverse the trend towards centralisation. Decentralisation has become the name of the game of the European planning establishment. However, when this assumption is tested [cf. the Dutch response paper based on a statistical analysis of polycentric development and regional disparity[11]] centralised systems, whether measured by rank order of cities or spatial distribution, seem to work just fine, in terms of job availability as well as sound local or regional economic bases generally. The authors found that the more monocentric the country the less regional disparities there are within that country, at least statistically. Thus, in terms of equity, centralised power which can impose decisions with greater impunity seems to work better than networked and shared power.

Despite being jealously guarded by political powers, physical structures are influenced by people's behaviour and their social, cultural and economic aspirations. Clearly both individual and collective human decisions are shaping spatial development. This warrants a closer look at governance of spatial development, be it monocentric or polycentric.

Political scientists have not yet undertaken a comprehensive comparative analysis of forms of spatial governance in the 55 UNECE member countries. This leaves general remarks about governance in relation to the proposed spatial development system for Europe. A number of response papers, especially from the new EU member states, applicants in waiting and those who aspire to align themselves on the EU development philosophy comment on the need to reform their approach to governance. [cf. One Turkish response paper discusses what governance and institutional change are required to put into place a viable planning system in a developing country[12]; the Armenian response paper describes the governance deficit in the transformation from centrally planned to a free market economic development and implementation powers introduced to achieve better infrastructure provision[13]; both the Slovak[14] and the Croatian[15] response papers emphasise the perceived changes in governance they need to achieve to comply with the balanced EU planning perspective].

Democratic deficit

In democracies, elected governments are responsible for these services and accountable to the electorate. Recent trends in Europe (at least in the EU region) show low participation in elections, especially at the supra-national but also the infra-national level. This can be interpreted in different ways.

Optimists believe that the electorate is satisfied with the service the politicians are delivering; they need neither change nor protest. All is well.

Pessimists see democracy ailing, despite Churchill's opinion – paraphrased - that democracy although not ideal is the least worst system in the game. [cf. Dutch response paper on enthusiasm and scepticism related to concepts of polycentric urban regions and urban networks, based on the findings of an EURBANET project on the Rhein-Ruhr, Randstad, Flemish Diamond and Central Scotland[16]].

In the pessimistic view Civil society feels alienated and powerless while the political executive continues to amass discretionary powers and weaken checks and balances, although many countries claim greater public participation and empowerment of local and regional civil society [cf. Turkish response paper on communicative planning and flexible governance, op.cit].

The issue here is about the power game between the forces which drive people's decisions regarding their spatial behaviour (choosing their place to live and work, building homes, moving to jobs and increasingly to leisure activities), arguably and perhaps erroneously conceived as bottom-up, and political forces which impose spatial strategies from above (top-down politics). The notion of polycentricity seems intent to find itself somewhere between these two strategies, or to encompass them both.

Those who consider that decision making powers have been attributed to them through democratic elections may have to reconsider their effective power base. They may not have the support (and there is a lot of evidence for that) of the local population on which urban regeneration or expansion is imposed. Similarly, those who live in the countryside may not want to remain there and prefer to benefit from the economic as well as social advantages and choices available in large agglomerations. A polycentric approach based on combining urban and rural nodes [cf. response paper of the NGO Rurality- Environment- Development[17]] may provide the necessary incentives to the rural population to live a sustainable existence in the countryside. As a counterpoint to polycentricity focused on urban development, the asset value of the natural heritage [cf. Armenia, op.cit], quality of the natural environment [cf. Slovakia, op.cit] and landscapes [cf. Council of Europe response paper, op cit] are recognised as inherent components of a balanced development strategy between rural and urban areas and considered a precondition of regional balance generally.

Institutional capacity fit for polycentricity?

There is general agreement that existing institutions are not best suited to foster polycentric development.

Whoever argues in favour of polycentricity acknowledges that it requires different administrative and governing structures from those developed under competitive capitalism in which cities compete with each other for private inward investment and public infrastructure resources. Yet, it is by no means proven that corporate management techniques as developed by the private sector are the most appropriate

form of governance for the public sector in discharging its responsibilities as custodian of the common good and the public realm.

Accountancy is not accountability, especially as regards social services run in the public interest. However, aspiration to EU membership is clearly orienting applicant states towards target setting, corporate management, adoption of liberal principles of development and privatisation [cf. Turkish response paper on driving forces of development and polycentricity as a tool of international integration[18]]. Land- and property ownership constitutes a major issue of spatial development strategies, especially in countries where land had been nationalised and is giving rise to political, legal and enforcement problems in what have become more liberal democratic systems [cf. Azerbaijan response paper, op.cit].

As the built environment and organisational structures have great inertia, any new urban development intervention has to cope with existing structures and behaviours. Even if polycentricity was accepted unanimously as a universal remedy against social, economic and physical disparity, how could it be implemented? Imposing a new spatial distribution and management structure based on a broad concept of long term, large scale balanced sustainable spatial development requires both physical and behavioural–cultural changes. Although bodies like CEMAT [cf. response paper on the activities of the Council of Europe[19]] recognise this, their approach remains general and normative. Their many interesting programmes and declarations lack practical solutions, especially as regards new instruments which would enable their constituents - sovereign governments - to relinquish or pool power for the greater good.

Intermediary levels of governance
One particular weakness of existing governmental structures is the regional level which is of prime importance in polycentric decision making. Currently regional governments, not always elected and with only selected sectoral competences operate as buffers or mediators between national and local government antagonisms. However, they may also guarantee some checks and balances in a national polycentric system. New forms of accountable institutional structures need to be created at intermediary levels, involving both sectoral stakeholders such as the business community and civil society. It is not always easy to put such structures in place, not least because such regions may lack identity. Neither the residential nor the working population may feel committed to them, as the English example demonstrates. One method may be to form temporary project based allegiances by mobilising stakeholders who are willing to engage in regional spatial developments and politics.

Partnerships and public participation
Partnerships, another 'passepartout' notion tend to be adopted as a panacea for a more efficient deployment of increasingly scarce public resources at all levels.[20] Their nature, suitability and performance need closer scrutiny before adopting them as blanket recipe to solve all ills of urban development and management. This applies especially to public-private partnerships which often lack civil society involvement. In many countries, planning has demoted participation to public consultation, the social sector has become mainly a bystander and many civil society stakeholders feel excluded. There is a lack of political debate which would grant those concerned at least part ownership of the destiny of their physical environment. The hegemony of markets has marginalised public-public partnerships although they

have shown success in generating self-financing urban regeneration in cities like Greater Bilbao and were able to act as catalysts for vertical integration of institutions. *Research could play a crucial role in projecting outcomes and financial requirements of partnerships and assessing real life partnerships before their widespread political adoption.*

Methodological issues

A last point concerns the methodological approach to polycentric development. Advocated are the four Cs: competition, complementarity, cooperation and coordination. The question is whether these approaches are in contradiction with each other or can generate convergence and synergy.

Competition, complementarity, cooperation and coordination
Governance, institutional arrangements, partnerships and participation are all instrumental in implementing any or all of the 'four Cs', or in optimising a combination of these instruments. Research has provided pertinent insight into this complex situation [cf. Dutch response paper[21]] The Dutch paper goes beyond theoretical discussion and attempts to measure the effects of the '4C' strategies or a combination of them to achieve both competitiveness and cohesion. It shows that depending on the criterion of success, different strategies can achieve success in different urban environments. They found that a precondition for these strategies to succeed was an overlap of geographic markets of demand for urban functions and activities within a polycentric structure. Moreover regional coordination and an institutional framework of cooperation are a prerequisite for achieving successful complementarity in polycentric urban regions, together with an awareness of the need for complementarity. Monitoring the gap with monocentric urban regions as regards their economic and social performance could increase such awareness.

Balanced sustainable development does not have to remain an abstract concept. Pilot projects whose results can be quantified could demonstrate how polycentric strategies, including cross border cooperation can change the conditions of excluded and peripheral regions. What needs to be taken into account by such experiments is the effects of these changes on strong monocentric regions which provide the bedrock of regional and national well-being. Comparisons with alternative redistributive policies would also have to be included. Finally, other than quantifiable economic benefits form part of spatial development. Emotional values which people attach to their regions and localities may generate resources from within to improve their well-being. The ethics which drive sustainability may remain an overriding force to maintain humanity in European development strategies, be they mono- or polycentric.

In the light of this discussion and findings from the response papers some initial questions may become relevant again. They include:

- To which extent should the process of polycentric development be a top-down or a bottom-up process?
- Are what level can polycentric development be most beneficial?
- What would persuade stakeholders to forego short term gains in favour of long-term benefits of polycentric development?
- Who are the potential winners and losers if polycentric development?

- How can given behaviour of governments, business and citizens be harnessed in favour of polycentric development in Europe?

Judith Ryser, Isocarp/ CityScope Europe, London, May 2006.

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