

# **The concept of polycentricity**

**Contribution to the conference on:**

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Dear participants to this conference.

It is a pleasure for me to be here and an honour to give an impulsstatement .

I accepted the invitation to give this statement, although to be quite frank I do not know much about the topic, as I on the other hand felt confident I can give some information and observations for a discussion on polycentricity/sustainability/role of cities and can also tell something about the Dutch proposals on urbanization that should fit into the policy goals on polycentricity and sustainability as an example and a model for the sake of our discussion.

The content of my contribution will be:

Part 1

- The concept of polycentricity, what is it?
- Polycentricity, what is it good for?
- The role of cities: different cities, different roles?

Part 2

- The example of the Netherlands

Part 3

- Some words on the sustainability aspect

## **PART 1 Polycentricity; from global to local**

### ***The concept of polycentricity; what is it?***

When one does not know very much yet about some topic one has to turn to good sources to get to know what at the moment in the planning scene is meant with polycentricity.

The concept of polycentricity of course got an enormous boost with the policy options of the ESDP.

In section 3; the policy aims and options for the territory of the EU under 3.1 (Spatial orientations of Policies) the first spatial development guideline is: (I cite) “development of a polycentric and balanced urban system and strengthening of the partnership between urban and rural areas.

For the authors of the ESDP a polycentric development of the EU (and possibly also within the Member States) was the favored orientation for development and the expectation was it would contribute to a more sustainable development of the EU.

This is however history and since the adoption of the ESDP in Potsdam in 1999 more and more practitioners and scientists have developed their interpretation of the content and the application of the concept.

There have been a number of seminars/meetings on the topic of polycentricity; recently in La Rochelle (2005). I went through the abstracts and articles. It will not surprise you when I conclude that there are quite various interpretations and expectations.

It is an impossible task to summarize in a few minutes the wealth of interpretations and expectations and I am hardly capable of drawing one or two overall conclusions.

Rather I would like to select a few (and this is certainly personal and very arbitrary) observations that might be input for discussion (and thereby partly repeating questions others already have formulated):

I selected three contributions I would like to summarize here:

Wil Zonnveld en Bas Waterhout, (Dutch colleagues) basing themselves on the Dutch example I will touch on later, observe:

*“Currently the dominant discourse within the European Union is to become the most competitive knowledge based economy in the world by 2010. Although its feasibility may be questioned, this objective, known as the Lisbon strategy, worries the minds of territorial planners in a sense that they have started asking how the territorial dimension could contribute to this strategy. (N.B. discussions by EU-ministers in Rotterdam and Luxembourg). At the same time, however, the*

*EU territory remains highly unbalanced, which is why cohesion objectives remain high on the political agenda. The seemingly conflicting cohesion and competitiveness objectives also figured in the ESDP process and were in the ESDP bridged by the concept of polycentric development.*

*In the meantime more knowledge has been gained about the concept of polycentricity among others by studying polycentric policies in European countries. Between these countries the Netherlands take in an exceptional position because it (s) (polycentricity goal) exclusively focuses on becoming more and more competitive. Moreover, the goal of an even distribution of welfare is even officially abandoned, something which obviously is easier to do in a fairly polycentric country.*

*In contrast, other countries focus their polycentric policies on achieving better cohesion or on a combination of cohesion and competitive objectives.*

Vincent Nadin and Nathalie Dürr (University of the West of England) make the following statement:

*“Many key actors responsible for analysis and policy development in relevant sectors see polycentricity as an abstract, complex and ambiguous concept that has dubious value as a policy tool. Many are also not convinced of the desirability of pursuing polycentric territorial development or the potential for public policy to effectively affect spatial development patterns at the transnational or even national scale. Reasons for this include the higher priority afforded to cross-border cooperation with near neighbours, competition among cities and regions; the perceived abstract nature and urban bias of the concept. However there are a number of critical issues for polycentric development that should be taken up in future co-operation programmes, particularly the implications of climate change, demographic change, the Lisbon Strategy and the inclusion of rural ‘meshes’ in polycentric networks”.*

Most stimulating however for my own reflections on the theme was an article by Simin Davoudi with the title:

Polycentricity in European Spatial Planning; from an analytical tool to a normative agenda.

Her observations (that I can only repeat here as well (and I should really be grateful to her)) as further input for the discussions in our seminar now, are a.o.:

*The notion of polycentricity is gaining widespread currency in both academic and professional debates. It has opened its way in the spatial policy documents of the EU and member states alike, and had become one of the key components of the integrated spatial development strategy promoted by the ESDP. Whilst polycentricity is increasingly shaping the spatial policy discourses both in the Commission and the Member States, the precise meaning of term has remained elusive.*

*Despite its widespread currency, the concept is not supported by clear definition, a robust theoretical framework and rigorous empirical analysis. Hence, polycentricity means different things to different people. For example, urban planners use the concept as a strategic spatial planning tool; economic and human geographers use it to explain the changing spatial structure of cities, the EU Commissioners and their counterparts in MS often promote the concept as a socio-economic goal aimed at achieving a balance regional development and civic leaders use the term for “place-marketing”, presenting the notion of polycentricity as synonymous with pluralism, multi-culturalism and dynamism. Furthermore, polycentricity means different things when applied to different scales. With a few exceptions, the concept has traditionally been applied to the meso-level of urban agglomeration, focusing on intra-urban patterns of clustering of people and economic activity. More recently, the concept has also been used at the macro-level of inter-urban scale to denote the existence of multiple centres in one region. A third, mega-level of polycentricity has been added to the debate by the ESDP. This uses the concept at intra-European scale and promotes polycentricity as an alternative to the core-periphery conceptualization of the European territory.*

*The resulting picture is one of complexity and confusion.*

*At the European scale the concept of polycentricity is used not to explain or analyse an existing or emerging phenomenon, but as a guiding principle for achieving two arguably conflicting goals of: on the one hand, making the EU,s economy more competitive in the world market; and on the other hand, reshaping its map of regional growth and decline into a more socially and spatially cohesive form. Whilst this seems an attractive response to regional disparities in Europe it is not without “weaknesses and pitfalls”.*

*Davoudi then presents as questions:*

- Is a balanced regional development achievable within the framework of current EU policies?*
- If not, what can cities and regions do to remain or to become competitive?*
- Do PUR’s (polycentric urban regions) provide a better chance for cities in peripheral regions to become economically more competitive?*
- If so, can policy intervention transform a number of neighboring cities into a genuine PUR*

And I would like to add for a discussion:

- Does this or not contribute to a sustainable development?

For: concentration (making the strong ones stronger) will make Europe (economically but also socially) more unbalanced.

However, the scale at which you look at the development, influences the conclusions.

## ***polycentricity, what is it good for?***

The second topic of my contribution is the question: polycentricity what is it good for?

This question, in many ways was already –often implicitly- answered through the observations I have just presented.

Let me for the sake of time summarize that there is a strong belief that polycentricity has advantages in the fields of efficiency and sustainability, but that this is questioned by more and more researchers. As far as I am concerned this is an important input for our discussions.

There is on this topic one aspect I would like to add.

The psychological aspect.

A few months' ago during a seminar in Germany professor Peter Taylor of the Loughborough University presented the results of a ranking study. He and his team in the so-called GaWC study ranked cities after several activities. Almost everytime London (and Paris) ranked 1 or 2, but German cities performed very poor. Only Frankfurt (financials!) ranked 14<sup>th</sup>.

BUT no other UK city could be found in the top 100 where a number of German cities in the end did.

What I would like to stress is:

Individual (“smaller”) cities rank lower than worldmetropolises (which in themselves are internally polycentric). Foreign investors looking at a ranking like this may avoid the cities that do not rank high (psychological effect). However a network of German cities might have had a much higher ranking and might solely from that point of view be of larger interest for investors (when contributing to the Lisbon goals for the EU)

## ***The role of cities; different cities, different roles?***

One of the driving forces behind polycentricity is the expectation that it is inefficient to give every (large) city every function/amenity but that specialization and cooperation is for the benefit of all. (given of course some geographical closeness and good connections between the cities)

This force is behind concepts like urban networks (Netherlands), Metropolregionen (Germany) etc

If the expectation is right this is an important development model for planners. And in this model the cities making up the network have different roles.

Can the question mark be skipped? (that is another question mark)

The answer lies in answering the question: does polycentricity (and specialisation) have advantages or not.

Once again there is no univocal answer to that question.

Judged on efficiency and sustainability the answer would be positive; judged on robustness of each city the answer might be negative. A city specialising in one or a limited number of activities is vulnerable when that activity is economically hit.

On behalf of the discussion I would like to pose the following thesis:

If the development model is for networks instead of individual cities the government(s) and the cities composing the network must make sure that there will be solidarity. That means that if one of the cities because of division of activities is hit the others should combined make up for the losses.

## Part 2 The Dutch example

### Urban networks

Here I show you the development of the Dutch urbanization over the last 150 years. Cities have grown considerably and if you like you can already distinguish on the maps the development of networks.

Networkbuilding (and attributing functions to each city in a network) has become an important concept and development strategy in the Netherlands and I would like to illustrate that on the basis of the NSS.

#### Urbanization policy in the Netherlands; the NSS 2005

The National Spatial Strategy

*The urbanization policy is laid down in the National Spatial Strategy.*

#### The character of the NSS

This National Spatial Strategy itself is of an interesting other character than its predecessors in the Netherlands for

- 1) It integrates spatial policy with the policy of the sectors with the largest influence on the use of space and the government explicitly states that it *has chosen to incorporate as much of the national policy as possible into one single strategy. A single National Spatial Strategy will help to reduce the overlap in the different policy fields and the number of separate policy documents, while offering more clarity and ensuring more coherence in the policy and its implementation.*
- 2) the government delegates more of its powers/responsibilities to the lower administrative levels.

In the introductory chapter the government presents this new approach and its philosophy of governance in a.o. the following way:

*“The National Spatial Strategy contains the government’s views on the spatial development of the Netherlands and the most important objectives associated with that development. In accordance with the government’s coalition agreement, the strategy represents the contribution of national spatial planning to*

- *a strong economy,*
- *a safe and livable society and*
- *an attractive country.”*

*So (this means) an economic, a social and a territorial goal.*



*“The main goal of national spatial policy is to create space for different functions on the limited area that we have available to us in the Netherlands. More specifically, the government focuses on four general objectives:*

- *Strengthening the international competitive position of the Netherlands;*
- *Strong cities and a vibrant, dynamic countryside;*
- *Preserving and developing important national and international spatial values;*
- *Ensuring public safety.”*

### Urbanization Policy

The urbanization policy in the NSS is laid down in a chapter with the revealing title (for it indicates the direction in which solutions are being sought) Networks and Cities.

In this chapter of the NSS the main goals of urbanization policy are described and specific concepts like national urban networks, economic core areas, main ports, brain ports and green ports are presented.

### Main goals of urbanization

*With its urbanization policy the government wants to create sufficient space for living, working and mobility and related aspects like public facilities, green areas, recreation, sports and water.*

The national government wants to concentrate urbanization and infrastructure into national urban networks, economic core areas and major transport axes as much as possible.

### National urban networks and economic core areas

The Netherlands is developing into a network society and a network economy. On the one hand, individualization continues to advance; on the other hand, all those individuals are increasingly closely interconnected in numerous networks. This development also has major consequences for spatial planning. There is more and more coherence between the various cities and urban areas. The government welcomes this development towards urban networks.

Partnerships between such networks expand the support base of public facilities and services and open up opportunities for optimal use of the scarce spaces.

*To respond to this trend, the national government has designated 6 national urban networks. The development of these networks is a high priority. The same applies to 13 economic core areas, which are mostly located within the networks..*

A national urban network is **defined** as an entity of larger and smaller cities including the open spaces in between. The cities and centers that comprise these networks complement and reinforce each others' strengths, so that they have more to offer together than they do as individual cities. It is explicitly not the intention that the national urban networks should create a new tier of government. The partnerships between the local and regional governments within the networks are completely voluntary, flexible and pragmatic. The national government expects the municipalities to draw up agreements on how they will shape the concentration policy, in consultation with the provinces and the urban regions.

Within each national urban network, the national government designates a number of areas where urbanization will be concentrated.

*Main ports, brain ports and green ports.*

Next to a policy on urban networks the NSS also presents a policy for main ports, brain ports and green ports.

On the one hand this policy is part of the urban networks policy, partly it is a specially developed policy as another reaction to the global networking developments.

The Netherlands has two main ports, Amsterdam Schiphol airport and the port of Rotterdam. These cover not only the actual airport and port areas, but also the surrounding regions, as a setting for offices of major urban and international businesses. The economic importance and the pressures on space around both main ports require national coordination.

In the area of research and development, the Eindhoven/South east Brabant region is highly prominent both nationally and internationally. The location policy and the policy for creating city centers in the national urban networks support the development of this brain port and other knowledge and innovation clusters.

Besides the two main ports and the brain port, the Strategy distinguishes 5 green ports: concentration s of knowledge-intensive horticulture and agribusiness. From an international economic perspective, the national government considers it important to preserve and strengthen the international importance of the horticultural function in these locations.

## Part 3: Some words on the sustainability aspect

### Sustainability

Awareness of the sustainability aspect is of growing importance. The Lisbon goals of the EU have been supplemented by the amendments of Gothenburg. The Council of Europe formulated the "(Ljubljana) Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development"

It remains therefore to be judged in how far the concepts of polycentricity and those in the National Spatial Strategy policy meet the goals of sustainability.

The government of the Netherlands explicitly presented the National Spatial Strategy as the Dutch contribution to Lisbon (economy) and Gothenburg (sustainability) goals of the EU.

**So let us see in how far this is met (and I have to make clear these are only first impressions from me without any analysis whatsoever, so see this only as another contribution to a possible discussion and not as proven facts)**

- 1) Formulating policy options in an integrated way and with the goal to integrate several fields of policy (space, economy, mobility, agriculture/rural areas) the chances of implementing a more sustainable policy have grown considerably. Conflicts have to be settled at a very early stage and no longer obstruct desirable developments, or make them very costly and time-consuming when adapting at a later stage.
- 2) The concept of urban networks and the policy formulated for developing such networks also is a strong contribution to a network society and at the same time offers enough possibilities to implement the policy in a sustainable way. Such policy where networks share their common strong aspects and not every individual partner strives after having "everything" itself shows strong awareness of the necessity to act careful with limited resources.

The Dutch government therefore is very confident the "new" urbanization policy is a contribution to a sustainable development of the Netherlands.

Having said this I must refer to some critical comments I have made before; only once more indicating that it is impossible to give one univocal conclusion.

Final remarks

I hope I have made clear with my presentation that polycentricity is a tricky, difficult, sometimes abstract, sometimes concrete concept. I tried to give you some insight and I hope my observations trigger you for a discussion.