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Planning sustainable mobility in polycentric regions: testing a participatory approach in six regions of Europe

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Abstract

This paper first discusses polycentric regions, their features and how they can be detected by means of indicators of regional structure and mobility patterns, and why polycentric regions will be increasingly relevant to the future of mobility planning in the EU landscape. The paper discusses then the experience of six polycentric regions - Marche (IT), Central Alentejo (PT), Central Macedonia (GR), Rhine Alp (AT), Heart of Slovenia (SI) and Parkstad Limburg (NL) - that applied a Future Search (www.futuresearch.net) based methodology to urban mobility planning. It provides a critical analysis of the regions' experience using the methodology and their plans to capitalise on its outcomes. This experience is used to develop and propose a **Poly-SUMP** participatory planning approach, with this new acronym being used for a new planning concept, i.e. **Polycentric Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans**. The paper discusses the pros and cons of the Poly-SUMP approach applied to the cities of polycentric regions, as opposed to the conventional methods used to elaborate Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans at the level of individual cities.

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Keywords: Polycentric Urban Mobility Plans; Future Search; governance of regional transport; participatory planning technique; cooperation between public and private actors; dialogue between citizens; stakeholders and decision makers.

1. Introduction

A sustainable urban mobility plan (SUMP) is a strategic plan designed to satisfy the mobility needs of people and businesses in cities and their surroundings, ultimately resulting in a better quality of life (see www.mobilityplans.eu).

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It builds on existing planning practices and takes due consideration of integration, participation and evaluation principles. The existing methodology and guidelines for SUMP concentrate on a single urban area. In contrast, the Intelligent Energy Europe funded project Poly-SUMP (see www.poly-sump.eu) aims to assist a typical polycentric region with the development of coherent and coordinated sustainable mobility plans for the different poles of the region, not only for a single mono-centric city.

The POLYSUMP project began in May 2012 and brings together a consortium of six regions - Marche (IT), Central Alentejo (PT), Central Macedonia (GR), Rhine Alp (AT), Heart of Slovenia (SI) and Parkstad Limburg (NL) – and private think tanks (ISIS, Trivector, Panteia, BOKU, Missions Publiques). The project has developed and tested a new participatory foresight approach based on Future Search and focusing on the particular needs of polycentric regions.

2. The first Poly-SUMP project focus: What is a polycentric region?

For the purposes of the Poly-SUMP project, “polycentric city regions” have been defined as „networks of medium-to-small cities and peri-urban villages in a relatively compact area – an area that could be travelled with a commuting time not exceeding 1 hour each way – and not dominated by a central large metropolitan city“.

The assumption is that polycentric city regions feature a capital (the largest) city with relatively low population (e.g. less than 200.000 inhabitants in larger regions or less than 100.000 inhabitants in smaller regions) and a number of intermediate poles of a size smaller than the capital city and greater than 5.000 inhabitants. 5.000 inhabitants was proposed as a pragmatic rule to distinguish urban poles from rural towns. However, a lower threshold (e.g. 2.000 inhabitants) could be appropriate for smaller regions. The population of these regions is mostly concentrated in medium-to-small urban poles, and higher and middle urban hierarchy functions are scattered across the different centres.

These regions are much more densely populated than the rural regions, but because population and urban functions are not concentrated in the capital city the accessibility and competitiveness of the region on the global market can be badly affected, as it is more difficult to achieve the critical mass of power, scale economies and visibility typical of large metropolitan regions. The figure below shows the pragmatic criteria used to identify such regions.

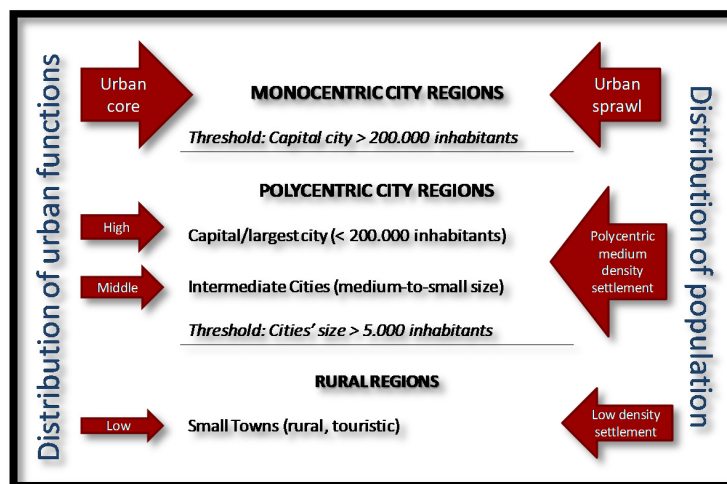


Fig. 1. Polycentric vs Monocentric and rural regions (Source: Poly-SUMP, Deliverable 2.5, C.Sessa, M.Fioretto, R.Poppelier, M. Bus, September 2013)

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