



The emergence of city-regions and their implications for contemporary spatial governance: Evidence from Ghana



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ABSTRACT

Over the years, urbanization has triggered complex spatial processes, such as the evolution of city-regions that defy traditional administrative regional boundaries. However, despite the growing body of research on city-regions, the evolution of this phenomenon and its implications for contemporary spatial governance remains a huge gap in urban planning literature, while approaches to their delineation have largely been restricted to commuting patterns data and approximations. This research examines the emergence of city-regions and their implications for contemporary spatial governance using Ghana as an illustrative case. In the process, inspired by Tobler's first law of geography and the concept of distance decay, the study engages a unique methodological approach that uses spatial mapping of rural-urban population continuum, transportation network, built-up patterns and GIS techniques for the delineation of city-region. The research finds a gap between the rapidly emerging spatial structure of Accra and the operational governance framework, as there is no provision in the latter for the planning and management of the evolving city-region which, territorially, spans multiple administrative regions. At the local context, while making the lagging spatial governance system more responsive to the dynamically evolving spatial structure, it is imperative that urban policy recognises city-regions, such as the Accra City Region (ACR), and their diverse opportunities; plan for them through joint development planning boards; and foster natural coordination even among local planning authorities across different administrative regions. At the global scale, the research practically illustrates that alternative methodologies based on spatial mapping and GIS techniques could provide useful insights into the study of city-regions.

1. Introduction

There has been a huge upsurge in the world's urban population over the past few decades, a trend that is still prevailing, particularly in the Global South. The proportion of the world's urban dwellers increased from about 30% to more than half between 1950 and 2014, and it is further projected to reach two-thirds by the mid-twenty-first century. In nominal terms, an additional 2.5 billion urban inhabitants are expected by 2050 (UN, 2014). While urbanization is generally skewed to the South, the phenomenon has been exceptionally swift in Africa and Asia (Pacione, 2009) as the two are likely to account for 9 out of every 10 of the forecasted urban population increase (UN, 2014).

The ongoing urbanization is replete with both positive and negative externalities. On the one side, it presents wide-ranging opportunities for socio-economic development, largely in the form of the creation of economies of scale, both internal and external, as well providing the requisite climate for the maximization of the micro-economies of agglomeration—sharing, matching and learning (Duranton & Puga,

2004). On the flip side, it presents many challenges, including stress on infrastructure, congestion, urban poverty, environmental degradation, food insecurity, and a host of other urban planning and management problems (Baloye & Palamuleni, 2015; Chen, 2007; Eigenbrod et al., 2011; Ravallion, Chen, & Sangraula, 2007; Watson, 2009).

In spatial terms, the phenomenon is occasioned by migration from rural areas to urban centres as well as natural processes of population growth manifesting in the expansion of existing cities and the formation of new ones (Cohen, 2006; UN-Habitat, 2010; Potts, 2012). Thus, urbanization triggers complex spatial processes that significantly alter spatial configurations in the form of their organization, relationships and flows. For instance, with no recourse to administrative planning boundaries, cities grow into one another to form conurbations, new spatial markets and city-regions.

On the global stage, especially in the United States, Europe and Asia, there has been a resurgence of the concept of city-region over the past few years, marking a shift from prior concentration on inner cities (Parr, 2008; Scott, Agnew, Soja, & Storper, 2001; Zhao & Zhang, 2007).

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By providing a platform for exploring interactions between urban centres and their outlying areas of dominant influence, city-regions have not only become the focal unit of urban and regional planning research but also are deemed to be a strategic unit for policy intervention (Davoudi, 2008; Parr, 2005). Thus, the surge in emphasis on city-regions is as much political as analytical (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008).

However, in recent decades, urbanization has been particularly imposing in sub-Saharan Africa. Although there is an array of research on the phenomenon, one grey area remains how the phenomenon triggers the evolution of spatial processes, such as city-regions and their implications on spatial governance, in various parts of the sub-region. Most of the research on urbanization in the continent has been city-centric, which in many instances explores urban expansion in analytical or descriptive terms. For instance, existing studies on urbanization in Ghana largely focus on: the elucidation of challenges (Yankson & Bertrand, 2012); examination of its transition (Songsore, 2009); management of physical development in peri-urban areas (Amoateng, Cobbinah, & Owusu-Adade, 2013); analysis of driving forces (Oduro, Ocloo, & Pehrah, 2014); and exploration of patterns (Acheampong, Agyemang, & Abdul-Fatawu, 2016; Cobbinah & Erdiaw-Kwasie, 2016), among others.

While the existing studies offer profound insights into understanding the urban context, the evolution of city-regions and their implications for contemporary spatial governance remains a huge gap in urban planning literature. Moreover, approaches to delineating the geographical extent of city-regions have largely been limited to data on travel-to-work patterns (Burger, de Goei, Van der Laan, & Huisman, 2011; De Goei, Burger, Van Oort, & Kitson, 2010) and approximations of convenient travelling time from the core (Davoudi, 2008). Presenting Ghana as a case—specifically focusing on Accra, the capital and largest urban centre, and its surrounding areas—this study examines the emergence of city-regions while exploring their implications on contemporary spatial governance. By juxtaposing the evolving urban spatial structure with the existing spatial governance system, the research examines the contemporary relevance of the latter and highlights critical spatial governance issues for policy consideration.

Contrary to previous dominant approaches to delineating the extent of city-regions, this study, inspired by Tobler's first law of geography and the concept of distance decay, engages a methodological approach that uses spatial mapping of rural-urban population continuum, transportation network, built-up patterns and Geographic Information Science (GIS) techniques for the delineation of city-regions. In addition to the availability of data, the choice of this approach offers new insights into the methodology of studying city-regions. The study draws on multiple datasets including, but not limited to, the usage of remote sensing images, land use data, population census and statutory spatial planning documents.

The illustrative case, Ghana, like many countries in the sub-region, has experienced rapid urbanization since independence in 1957. The country recorded an urban population of about 12.5 million in 2010 and, for the first time, became more urban than rural with urbanization level of 51% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). Having collectively gained about 8.5 million additional urban dwellers between 1984 and 2010, Accra, the capital, and Ghana's other major cities have expanded considerably both in population and space. In response, through the planning system, the country has embarked on several planning actions, including: the introduction of the Land Use Planning and Management Project (LUPMP); the formulation of the Spatial Development Framework (SDF) for the nation and a plan to formulate one for each of the regions; and the preparation of sub-regional plans for major metropolitan areas like the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA) and the Greater Kumasi sub-region. The efficacy of these planning actions and the overall spatial governance system situated within the context of the rapid evolution of the city-region is addressed by the subsequent sections. The conceptual and theoretical framework of the research are discussed within the next section.

2. The concept and rise of city-regions

There has been a rise in the concept of the city-region in both academia and policy environs over the past couple of decades (Etherington & Jones, 2009). In some contexts, its resurgence is viewed as a consequence of globalization (Deas & Giordano, 2003; Scott, 2001; Zhao & Zhang, 2007) and a political shift towards new-regionalism (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Rossi, 2004), while in others, it marks a move from the preoccupation with inner cities and suburbs to a broader perspective of exploring intricate and complex relationships that exist in space, principally, between cities and their outlying sphere of influence (Davoudi, 2008; Parr, 2005). Indeed, across many jurisdictions, largely in Europe and the United States, city-regions have emerged as the fulcrum of spatial development interventions (Healey, 2009; Neuman & Hull, 2009). Among researchers, the principal unit of analysis is now city-regions, compared with decades ago, when it was largely cities.

While the rejuvenation of city-regions and their growing global attraction is nascent, the origin of the concept dates back over a century (Davoudi, 2008). The term was coined in 1947 by Robert Dickinson, though the usage of the concept is traceable to the early years of the twenty-first century (Dickinson, 1947). Geddes (1915) echoed similar conceptions albeit through the notion of conurbation, which required that planning consider the resources of not only the core city but its region. Relatedly, McKenzie's (1933) idea of the metropolitan community reflected one that integrates the broader area where the city exerts dominant socio-economic influence, a perspective shared by Bogue (1949).

In exploring the meaning of the concept, it is important to highlight that it has been conceptualized in diverse ways and there is no commonly agreed definition (Parr, 2005). Dickinson (1964) advanced that the concept is more of a mental construct and less of a fine spatially delineated area. Over the years, researchers have used the term in multiple contexts to reference varied spatial scales, often mixed up with other terminologies such as global cities, world cities and region states, among others (Hall, 2001; Sassen, 2001). In an attempt at its definition, Ache (2000, pp. 704–705) argues that: “The city-region transcends the local level (as the basic administrative unit) and goes beyond the city level. In a spatial sense, the city region is very much like a conurbation or metropolitan area. Most importantly, the city region is far more of a complex system than a monolithic entity. The evolving city region constitutes a political and economic power field comprised of a variety of cultures and societies.” According to Davoudi (2003, p. 986), “The concept of city region (which is consistent with Geddes' original definition of conurbation and Gras' concept of ‘metropolitan economy’) moves beyond such distinction and covers not only the commuting hinterland of the city but also the whole area which is economically, socially, and culturally dominated by the city.” There are several other definitions aside from these (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008, discusses more on this).

Despite the multiplicity of definitions and conceptualizations, there are a number of commonalities. Fundamental to all is the existence of a core city and its surrounding hinterlands which are connected in diverse spatial relationships. As wide-ranging as the typology of those relationships, most definitions agree on economic interactions characterised by flow of goods, services and people, while others articulate socio-cultural interactions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2008). This broad understanding is somewhat grounded in the theory of urban systems, which recognises that cities and their surrounding areas are inter-linked functionally in a symbiotic relationship typified by economic flows including labour market interactions and trade among firms (Davoudi, 2008; Parr, 1987). The relationships, which do not necessarily respect spatial administrative boundaries, evolve with time.

Morphologically, city-regions are viewed to have zonal structure, comprising core and surrounding zones (Davoudi, 2003; Parr, 2005, 2008). The core zone is constituted by a contiguous expanse of built-up

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