



Flexibility is key to managing urban sprawl

As society changes, it places new demands on its surroundings. New research has found that some EU countries are better able to manage the undesirable expansion of cities, the concept known as 'urban sprawl', because they have a flexible spatial planning policy that can easily adapt to changes. Urban sprawl is a term used to describe the expansion of residential suburbs around city centres, driven by peoples' desire to live in larger houses and the ease of transport made possible by cars.

Increasing the density of people within cities instead of spreading the population outwards may be more favourable for several social and environmental reasons, including greater energy efficiency and reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Some countries in Europe have been far more successful in limiting urban sprawl than others.

To investigate why the level of urban sprawl is so variable across Europe, the researchers, funded under the EU Cost Action programme¹, examined previous studies on the topic and conducted extensive consultations with experts in three case study countries: Belgium, the Netherlands and Poland. By examining each country's history of spatial planning policies, the researchers identified the presence or absence of *flexibility* as a major reason behind success or failure in limiting urban sprawl.

Since the start of the industrial revolution, the Dutch have been very efficient in adapting and improving their approach to spatial planning challenges and urban sprawl has been no exception. This success has been driven by considerable political support, governmental expertise in site development and growing public awareness of environmental issues. Another major factor has been considerable collaboration between the public and private sectors, resulting in jointly beneficial projects, such as the renovation of residential apartments above shops.

In contrast, urban sprawl has increased in Poland and Belgium. Belgium has had limited success containing urban sprawl, because formal land use regulations were only developed much later than they were in the Netherlands, not until the second half of the 20th century. This has resulted in limited financial and economic experience of spatial planners in most Belgian municipalities and a difficult relationship between local planning agencies and private developers.

In Poland, the transition from Communism to capitalism and an inherent distrust of 'top-down' imposed constraints has led to urban land use being almost entirely driven by market forces, i.e. for profit, rather than as a resource to meet societal needs. Public and private collaborations are almost entirely absent. In Poland and other emerging countries across Europe, the combination of economic growth and less well-developed planning regulations could lead to uncontrolled suburban development, warn the researchers.

The researchers conclude that the ability to balance and integrate three different factors is a key to good spatial planning policy. These are: (i) market forces and the right of people to own property, (ii) land use regulations imposed by public authorities and (iii) mutual trust between public and private interests. With its long tradition of spatial planning, Member States should look to the Netherlands as an example of how to build a flexible and quite successful spatial planning framework, the study advises.

1. This study was conducted as part of the EU Cost Action Land Management for Urban Dynamics project. See: www.cost.eu/domains_actions/tud/Actions/TU0602 or <http://orbi.ulg.ac.be/handle/2268/111064>

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