'Striving for Polycentricity' – A driver to rework governance capacities in European Metropolitan areas?

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Abstract

The paper explores and identifies current challenges of territorial governance regimes in metropolitan areas in regards to responding to an increasingly applied strategic normative image; namely that of promoting a polycentric urban region. Based on empirical results in twelve metropolitan areas in Europe, the paper will identify current concepts, controversies and demands to adapt current governance regimes. The analysis will be deepened by reflecting the planners' perceptions and rationalities in regards to the practices of implementing a polycentric strategy in the Stockholm urban agglomeration.

The following paper reflects some observations and findings gained from assisting and advising an international expert group of planning practitioners over a period of 18 months. Using text analysis as well as participating observation, the paper will reflect similarities and differences of the planners' rationales and experiences that are closely connected to the application of polycentricity within European metropolitan areas in relation to the adaptability of existing governance capacities. In regard to the case of Stockholm a number of municipal plans within the larger urban agglomeration have been analysed to assess whether there is coherence between the intentions of the regional plans from 2001 and 2010 that suggest a more polycentric Stockholm region and the actual physical planning strategies at the municipal level. Secondly, a number of interviews were conducted with planners at the regional and municipal level to get insights on the existing challenges and the need to take up new processes for a polycentric development of Stockholm.

A major conclusion is that the concept of polycentricity demands a high level of systemic understanding of metropolitan areas. The concept of polycentricty can be a driver if it is supported by an institutional framework that is able to adopt adequate and well-timed strategies in different fields of policies. It is not only a spatial concept; it also entails a specific governance capacity and response. However, beyond policy integration (e.g. adoption in municipal plans) it also claims, unsurprisingly, cooperation among the many key stakeholders (e.g. municipalities, transport organizations, real estate developers etc.). As it is also a complex concept that provokes different understandings, the development of a mutually perceived mindset is a central starting point for working with polycentricty. Also it became clear that it demands coordination at different levels with various stakeholders to ensure that the entire metropolitan area develops consistently according to 'a single concept for polycentrity' (and not many different). Central is here to 'harmonize' the many stakeholders different interests, agendas and territorial logics at different spatial scales.

In regards to the governance structures of the Stockholm urban agglomeration it can be argued that the work on polycentricity carried out so far has raised awareness among planners and politicians in respect of the benefits and potentials of co-operating with neighboring municipalities. This has demanded so far some organizational innovations, on the side of the municipalities concerning new working fields and the need for new expertise/knowledge as well as on the side of the regional planning office. The latter has become increasingly more aware of the active support of the municipalities with providing analyses on central themes, conducting workshops and seminars, and as a kind of sounding board for the municipal planners in this respect. The hitherto interactive and dialog-oriented process to follow-up the concept of polycentricity has helped to further anchoring its core objectives. It was also felt by the interviewees that the launch of the concept in 2001 was a useful kick-start to inter-sectoral thinking in the planning departments and to start the establishment of the planners' networks needed to develop so-called 'regional urban cores' across municipal borders. It became also clear that the application of the until then unknown complex concept demands a high degree of systemic understanding as one needs to delve deeper into the character of urban configurations today and the logics and inherent processes of spatial planning of the metropolitan area as such and its different 'cores'/'centres' in particular. In a nutshell one can say that the application of the concept demands a sound adaptation in view of three dimensions: a) the institutional set-up (i.e. to organize the interaction between stakeholders), b) within organizations (e.g. to establish new competences), and c) at the individual level (i.e. to shape mutual understandings and mindsets among stakeholders).

Keywords: governance capacity, polycentricty, metropolitan areas