

Agglomeration benefits and polycentric growth: envisioning an efficient central metropolitan area in Belgium

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Acknowledgement

This extended abstract is based on a larger study which was carried out by a research team, composed as follows:

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Rationale

In Flanders (Belgium), the regional government engages itself to develop an efficient ‘metropolis Flanders’, which is large enough to assume an important economic position in the network of urban regions of the north-western European delta. The heart of this urban agglomeration is the metropolitan core area that comprises roughly the functional space of the quadrangle Brussels-Leuven-Antwerp-Ghent, also known as the ‘Flemish Diamond’ (Albrechts & Lievois, 2004). This densely populated core area is well accessible and embedded in the European context, but experiences a variety of pressures. For example, a large portion of the predicted population growth of Flanders and Brussels is expected to settle in this area. As a consequence, the development of a ‘metropolis Flanders’ should be based on solid strategic planning policies.

The current paper reports on a research project (Van Meeteren et al., 2015), aimed at determining whether the defined metropolitan area operates as a well-integrated urban agglomeration, and at developing a spatial vision on strengthening this metropolitan core area through a stakeholder debate. We make this analysis respectively with regards to the labour

market, the housing market, and the transport sector (with the emphasis on public transport). The study is positioned within the guidelines as set out by the Green Paper on Spatial Policy in Flanders (Flemish Government, 2012), meaning that the emphasis will be put on the ability to support a spatial visioning process, rather than aiming for an exhaustive spatial analysis. The exercise is carried out in a complex institutional context. Boussauw et al. (2013) indicate that the central-Belgian metropolitan area spreads out across three administrative regions (Flanders, Brussels Capital Region, and Wallonia), with the Dutch-French language border as a very strong barrier within some subsystems (e.g. within a range of public services), but nonetheless negligible in many other subsystems (e.g. international businesses).

Method

The paper starts with a literature review, in which a first part combines the traditional optimum city size question (Alonso, 1971) with the issue of the constraints under which a polycentric region can be considered an integrated urban agglomeration (Meijers, 2008). In a second part, the validity of the so-called regional housing markets as an analytical framework for studying the integration of residential and labour markets is assessed (Van Nuffel & Saey, 2005).

Then, threshold values derived from the literature are operationalized through accessibility analyses, firstly based on the road network, and secondly based on the (public) rail transport network. The applied accessibility analyses are experimental in the sense that the employed classes do not equal isochrones, but are defined by means of critical population mass thresholds.

Furthermore, the road-based part of the accessibility analysis has immediately been qualified as 'naive', because it shows the implicit logic behind location seeking behaviour in an era without structural road congestion. Today, however, congestion has become an important steering factor in location choices of households, businesses and organizations. In spite of still incomplete understanding of this phenomenon, policy intentions of the Flemish government have started to take these effects into account. Within the given research project, this attitude first translates into the application of an alternative accessibility analysis exclusively directed towards (public) rail transport, and second into recognizing 'proximity' (rather than 'accessibility') as an important spatial quality in the visioning process.

Subsequently, the regional housing markets in Flanders and Brussels are assessed, in an effort to distinguish between labour basins, which largely focus on one employment centre while being relatively homogeneous in terms of real estate prices.

In a third phase the results of the analysis are presented to a group of relevant stakeholders from Flanders and Brussels, aiming for a structured debate organized in two parallel workshops. The prepared analytical material proved an ideal basis for reflection. The resulting discussions were summarized into a vision statement with three corresponding structure maps, which will be used in the decision making process by the Flemish government.

Results and conclusions

From a methodological perspective, this research proves to be innovative because it combines policy-oriented spatial analyses with multidisciplinary expert knowledge, aiming to end up with a new vision on metropolitan spatial development.

By framing the analysis from the very beginning within the existing guidelines for a new spatial vision for the Flemish metropolitan core area, the required spatial analyses could be worked out quickly.

The conclusions of the study can be summarized as follows:

- The Flemish metropolitan core area, and by extension, the central Belgian metropolitan area, encompasses today an already competitive mass in terms of population and labour, and is sufficiently connected as well, which makes the system to be considered an integrated urban agglomeration.
- In order to employ agglomeration benefits as much as possible, and in order to realize further urbanization in a more sustainable manner, population growth must be accommodated as much as possible in the already urbanized area. In this regard, the emphasis is on the cities of Brussels and Antwerp, and on the axis between these two conurbations.
- New development and intensification should, wherever possible, be oriented towards the rail network (train, metro, tram and light rail), while overall, the built environment should be designed as compact as possible.

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