

URBAN NETWORKS IN EUROPE: POLICIES, PRACTICES, OUTCOMES

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Abstract. Over the past twenty years urban “networking” has become a rule of behaviour in the European Union. This article concerns the development of urban networks within the European urban geography. Urban networks have an important role in disseminating a development model for urban areas by bringing together a diverse range of cities around common problems in order to create common understandings of how to address these problems—the new ‘conventional wisdom’. These networks have also developed a range of different methods “to be active” in order to achieve different territorial outcomes. In that sense, which are the outcomes of those cities that have shown a strong “aptitude in urban networking”?

Key words: urban networks, cities, Europe, good practices

INTRODUCTION

Cooperation, networking, exchange of good practices, territorial cohesion, these have been the driving concepts in European policies and in urban policies for territorial development for more than 20 years. Cooperation and networking tend to get a synergetic effect in which the achievable output, by means of cooperation, is higher to the one that single cities could gain by exploiting their single resources.

This article concerns the development of urban networks within the European urban geography. Urban networks are composed by urban areas physically distant one from the other. However, by conducting liaisons and collaborating on common issues through the participation to a network, cities exploit scale economies in complementary relationships and synergies in cooperation and enable the benefits of “centrality”, even from positions on the periphery.

Over the last two decades, urban networks have demonstrated a range of different ways of establishing and developing different policies and different practices. In this concern, the aim of this article is to do a critical reflection on the policies, practices and outcomes of urban networks in Europe. In that sense, what are the outcomes of those cities that have shown a strong “aptitude in urban networking”?

Without overlooking the existence of local or regional urban networks, representing networks of local systems based on the interaction of entities that are physically close together, with the aim of developing synergies capable of attracting functions and investments, the focus of this contribution is on *networks of cities* that are physically distant one from the other, that conduct liaisons and collaboration on common issues (Rossignolo 1998).

NETWORKING AS A RESPONSE TO GLOBALISING AND LOCALISING FORCES

The development of an information society, the improvement and strengthening of infrastructure networks, the development of a global economy and European integration all constitute processes of mondialisation affecting our society (Albrechts et al. 1995; Sassen 2003).

Those phenomena have radically changed location criteria of economic activities and people that were marked by centrality of urban areas and depended on distance among centres. The “new” localization theory (Amin and Thrift 1992) depends on the integration of strategic factors. In other words, these trends support the development of more efficient areas, where external economies reach top-levels.

The role that every city has consolidated in the past years in the basically closed economy of its own country is no longer a real fact. European cities, no longer protected by the national policies of the States, are exposed to the growing competition of a dynamic market and of an “infinite” space. In particular, the creation of the Single European Market (SEM) favours increased exchange, stimulating both competition and innovative processes. The creation of the EU has offered better prospects, both for the more developed areas and for the less privileged ones. The weaker areas have taken advantage of regional specialisation by more fully exploiting relevant advantages and disadvantages arising from the adaptations required by the integration and by further limitations that full adhesion to the EU imposes on its member States.

Urban development is in different ways linked with globalisation (Amin and Thrift 2002; Lever and Bailly 1996; Sassen 2003; Veltz 1996). As a consequence, the effects of competition are more immediate and intense. In fact in this new extended market two important phenomena occur:

- *territorial competition* between cities that provide the same areas of specialisation and that induce research into a growing efficiency in the production of goods and services

- *cooperation* with other cities for the reciprocal integration and collaboration both of economic and production aspects and of services.

Cooperation tent to get a synergetic effect in which the achievable output by means of cooperation, is higher to the one that single cities could gain through the exploitation of their single resources. Cooperation allows a single city to be able to rely upon other cities' resources, developing positive effects of synergy with endogenous resources of that territory. That resources are constituted by manpower, by technological and managing know-how, by specific economic, political, social capacities, by access to information circuit (route) or by local networks.

As a result, the last two decades have witnessed an increasing focus on the role of cities and regions at global, European, national and sub-national levels—cities and regions are increasingly viewed as “collective actors” in the process of development (Bagnasco and Le Galés 2000; Jensen-Butler et al. 1997) playing a key role in Europe's development. In fact, cities and regions have regained the position they occupied prior to the emergence of modern nation states as important political, economic and social actors. Today cities increasingly engage in ‘foreign policy’, they form alliances and compete against each others within the European Union, because the ability to act effectively within the EU has become no less important than the ability to attract, for instance, a company or an international event to their territories (Robson 1992; Pyrgiotis 1991; 1992; Cheshire and Gordon 1995).

The city becomes the space for interaction between *vertical relationships*, in which the economic entities relate with a substratum that has been inherited through history and is virtually non repeatable, and *horizontal relationships*, through which the same entities relate with other systems and entities, thus creating a dense fibre of network interconnections.

The central-peripheral “area” model (Dematteis 1996) for territorial organisation, in which a city dominates its areas of influence in a hierarchical way, without any external relationships, is joined by a model of a “network city” connected with the rest of the world over a long distance. In the networking organisation of the territory, each city acquires a vast amount of freedom in the choice of its development path, because its territorial function is no longer directly linked to its dimension, but rather to the competitiveness of its internal structure, to its strategic design and planning capacity and to its ability to “sell” abroad (Camagni 1994).

WHAT DOES URBAN NETWORKS METAPHOR MEAN?

Networks vary widely in nature and contents. The concept of network is not an invention of 20th century. Since 16th century, cities are the keystones of such organization of spaces including the organization of trade and the execution of colonial imperial and geopolitical strategies. In other words, these activities and relations can

be grouped as cultural-religious, political-military and economic-mercantile activities which have led to emerge religious places, strategic places and market places respectively. The difference between these activities is about how they organize spaces; while non-economic activities organize the space hierarchically economic activities create networks (Jacobs 1984).

Urban networks metaphor is one of the most frequently discussed themes of urban geography in the last decades, not only from the point of view of conceptual elaboration, but also for its empirical aspects. The concept of the urban network is often used in different contexts and with different meanings that up to now have not been explained in a coherent interpretative framework yet.

As a basic definition, a network consists of nodes and links which display a pattern of connectivity (Taylor 2004). From the perspective of urban planning, network of cities can be defined according to (i) their structure – such as horizontal, vertical and polycentric (Dematteis 1994; Dematteis and Guarrasi 1995), (ii) their nature—such as synergy creator and complementary (Camagni and Salone 1993) and (iii) their function—such as generator and transmitter of knowledge (Trullén and Boix 2003). The theory of the city network paradigm claims that through participation in the network, cities exploit scale economies in complementary relationships and synergies in cooperation (Capello 2000).

M. Castells (1996) reaffirmed the importance of networked places by identifying a shift from a world organized around ‘spaces of places’ toward one organized around ‘spaces of flows’. In the former case, locations were significant because of the activities that took place *within* them, while in the latter they are significant because of the activities that take place *between* them, serving as conduits for coordinating activities in other locations. Cities, in their role as nodes in a global network, are therefore crucial to the global economy because they serve as luminal zones for placeless and mobile money and ideas.

Cities tend to reaffirm their role in directing and governing economic and territorial processes within an area that is no longer circumscribed to their centre of gravity and influence, but to a set of cities, a network of cities, a “network of horizontal relationships”. In so doing, cities establish tangible and intangible linkages both upstream to the national and international levels and downstream to their local subjects, as it is explored more in details in the following section.

NETWORKING AT DIFFERENT TERRITORIAL SCALES

In spatial sciences literature (urban geography, spatial planning, urban policy) it is possible finding different levels of networking:

- at the *local or regional level*, based on short-range connections, proximity and cooperation aimed above all at developing functional, including trans-border, synergies and complementary activities.

- at the *supra-local level* through long-range connections, strategic alliances and cooperation on common social and functional themes.

In the first case, the local contest and the proximity are foundative elements of this kind of networking. These networks represent links of local systems based on the interaction of entities that are physically close together, with the aim of developing synergies capable of attracting functions and investments. D. F. Batten (1995) writes that “a network city evolves when two or more previously independent cities, potentially complementary in function, strive to cooperate and achieve significant scope economies aided by fast and reliable corridors of transport and communication infrastructures”. However, this implies intersecting and overlapping between different networks (one doesn’t exclude the other) so that one node may belong to networks of different levels and function as intermediary between them, namely between local networks and global networks.

The second type of networking refers to strategic cross-border alliance, that represent *networks of cities* that are physically distant one from the other, that conduct liaisons and collaboration on common issues, this being the case of several urban networks developed in recent years within the framework of the European Union.

URBAN NETWORKS IN EU

Since 1989 the European Commission has been directly encouraging the formation of urban and regional networks by means of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), initially with pilot projects, then formally with the RECITE initiative I and II (Regions and Cities of Europe) (CEC, DGXVI n.d., 1994; EC, DGXVI 1996 a; 1996 b). It has promoted interregional and interurban cooperation by means of about forty cooperation networks for common projects between local and regional authorities (with populations higher than 50,000 inhabitants). The proposals stem both from international organisations representing cities and regions and directly from groups of local authorities, evidence of a strong need to develop a solid policy for improving the local public operation. In the RECITE programme each network fosters the economic development of its members in such a way that the programme as a whole contributes to consolidate the economic and social cohesion within the Community.

The European scene of cooperation opportunities has been completed in 2000 with the introduction of the interregional *cooperation*—strand C of the INTERREG¹ Initiative—a young instrument offering the perfect opening up of exchanges. Interregional cooperation aims to improve the effectiveness of regional development policies and instruments through large-scale information exchange and sharing of experience (networks). Strand C particularly focuses on underdeveloped regions and those undergoing structural adjustment. Interregional cooperation covers the RECITE and ECOS-Ouverture programmes, two innovative pilot project programmes ran under the former Article 10 of the ERDF regulation during the 1990s.

¹ For more information on the INTERREG IIIC programme see: <<http://www.interreg3c.net>>

Like the INTERREG IIIC programme, INTERREG IVC² (as part of the European Territorial Cooperation Objective) will continue to fund projects in which regional and local authorities exchange and transfer their experiences and work together to improve the effectiveness of regional development policies. However there will be some changes in priorities and approaches. For example, in line with the Community Strategic Guidelines for Cohesion Policy 2007–2013, INTERREG IVC will concentrate more specifically on priorities of the Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas.

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF SOME EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVE NETWORKING

In terms of interaction and integration of cities, European cities are among the very successful ones. Urban networks have shown in those two decades different ways of establishing, developing and even maintaining partnerships and collaboration among cities and local authorities.

These urban networks have also shown different ways “to be active” throughout different territorial outcomes (Avedano and Rossignolo 2008):

- a means for exchanging information on projects, activities, knowledge, for circulating news horizontally between cities. Networks have shown different means to share their knowledge, ideas, experience and good practices, but also to create common cultural values, including meetings, seminars, conferences, databases, web sites, training, newsletters, on-line communities of practice.
- a way of interconnecting cities, within defined projects, that goes beyond the simple circulation of information to provide integrated development systems.
- a political lobby for influencing the decisions made by community institutions, in particular to promote urban policies structured within the European Commission. Eurocities³, as a specific urban network to represent its own collective interests, is the most influential one over the last decade. It successfully represents the interest of major cities towards the European Commission and the other EU institutions.
- a potential means for accessing community financing, representing an opportunity for the cities to start up certain projects without intermediation by the national states. Financing, though relatively limited, at least, if compared to that granted by Structural Funds for European areas with problems, represents a strong stimulus for the cities, as they often enable the start-up of European transformation projects, which otherwise would need long delays because of the competent state administrations.
- a stimulus that mobilises and organises local actors for projects or the affirmation of a specific role of the city on the international scene through the improvement in capacity/efficiency of partners involved.

² For more information on INTERREG IVC programme see: <<http://www.interreg4c.net>>.

³ EUROCIITIES is a network founded in 1986 and brings together the local governments of more than 130 large cities in over 30 European countries. It provides a platform for its member cities to share knowledge and ideas, to exchange experiences, to analyse common problems and develop innovative solutions, through a wide range of Forums, Working Groups, Projects, activities and events. For more information see: <www.eurocities.eu>.

- a laboratory – a think tank where in a bottom up approach EU mainstream policies can be tested, discussed, re-negotiated and in some cases even changed.
- a “more neutral” room for testing EU policies, an open air laboratory where a central role is played by pilot projects and the actors involved.
- a room to nourish and enhance the European dimension in a kind of virtual circle where EU institutions and cities can play their respective roles and mutually affect themselves in a positive way. For instance, over the past five years, INTERREG III C has helped partners from 194 regions around Europe, by cooperating economically, socially and environmentally through projects that share knowledge and experience. The regions involved were from all around Europe, and the partners did not necessarily share borders. The large-scale information exchange made possible by INTERREG III C was intended to improve the effectiveness of regional development policies, instruments and strategies. The goal of this effort was to enhance development and economic and social cohesion across Europe, and to help Europe’s lagging regions catch up with more developed areas. INTERREG III C worked by inviting regions from around the EU to propose projects and apply for funds.
- a “fast track” element for cities in the “new” Member States whose role could be more effective thanks to good and bad practices exchanges. The challenge for the enlarged European Union is to make the most of the potential for growth available in its regions. In that sense, URBAN and INTERREG III have helped cities and regions form partnerships to work together on common projects. It enables cities and regions to share knowledge and experience to help them develop new solutions to economic, social and environmental challenges.
- an opportunity for improving the image of a city by the means of urban marketing actions inside and abroad the city, by affirming its identity and making it known to the citizens, and abroad by creating an identity capable of attracting networks and investments. Some other urban networks have contributed to the internationalisation of small and medium-sized cities by providing access to new European markets and by developing international co-operation in order to increase competitiveness and generate new jobs in the Edge Cities regions.

CONCLUSIONS

What does “active networking” really mean for an European city? Is it possible to do a positive assessment of those twenty years of urban networking? Is it possible to define the learning processes undertaken?

In general, the critical assessment of some experiences of European urban networks is positive. Networks can be decline in different ways and cities can “use” them with different intensity and even playing different roles for different goals and outcomes (Rossignolo 1998). In fact not every city is interested in them. But over the last twenty years hundreds of networks have been established: about one third of

them are still active, while another third is surviving (meeting difficulties in maintaining role and identity) and the others disappeared (particularly when the EU funding period stopped) (Rossignolo 1998).

In any case, the majority of them experienced and is still experiencing a dramatic turn over in terms of membership, been the commitment of cities and local authorities often linked to political and organisational reasons.

In general, from cities point of view, networks are a way to be more active in urban planning. To be in urban networks becomes a capacity of internal integration. Moreover, active networking so far implies a political and structural vision, flexibility in overcoming a localistic approach, as well as an active involvement. In fact, urban networks have been recognized as a tool for cities to carry on “foreign policy”, to look about and to learn from other experiences. Active networking can be considered also a part of cross border identity of a city in the EU, a sort of a “fuel of the city’s engine”.

The European urban networks are therefore a strategic weapon for competition between European cities (van den Berg and van Klink 1992).

But is it possible to affirm that networks between European cities have also represented a strategic action for equilibrium and cohesion within the member states? What are the outcomes from EU point of view? There’s no doubt about the role of networks in the EU territory as twenty years of experiences show from Recite I to Interreg IV. Firstly, it’s possible to say that urban networks are part of a wider Europeanization process (Atkinson and Rossignolo 2010). Urban networks represent a strategic approach for restoring the equilibrium in the EU territory in particular with the enlargement to the Eastern Europe and ensuring cohesion within the member states according to the Lisbon and Goeteborg agenda strategy. Even if each city faces different urban problems and national and local institutions and policy traditions still matter, a common ‘pan-European’ way of thinking is emerging. Moreover, European urban networks seem to be the right place to check the effectiveness of the European “policies” vis à vis the dynamics and the quickness of the social and political transformations in the European urban arena

Amongst other roles these networks have an important role in popularising and disseminating a development model for urban areas by bringing together a diverse range of cities around common problems in order to create common understandings of how to address these problems—the new ‘conventional wisdom’ (Atkinson and Rossignolo 2010).

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