

# **BUILDING REGIONAL POLICY NETWORKS: A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR POLYCENTRIC URBAN REGIONS**

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# BUILDING REGIONAL POLICY NETWORKS: A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR POLYCENTRIC URBAN REGIONS

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of polycentricity is becoming increasingly popular in spatial policies. The concept basically refers to the existence of a number of urban centres in a certain area. Spatial planners attach great value to such polycentric urban patterns on several levels of scale. These levels range from the European to the regional one. Although the meaning of the concept, as well as the purposes of policies differ on the various scales, polycentricity in general is chiefly considered a means to achieve both a more balanced spatial pattern of development and a higher level of international territorial competitiveness of the area at stake. The major part of this paper deals with polycentric urban configurations on the regional level of scale. This scale is roughly demarcated as the upper range of individuals' daily activity patterns. On this scale, the concept most frequently refers to a polycentric configuration that should be equipped to strengthen the regional competitiveness.

In large parts of Europe, notably north west Europe, the urban landscape is dominated by polycentric patterns. On the regional level, these are systems of historically distinct and both administratively and politically independent cities that are located in more or less close proximity and that lack a dominating city in political, economic, cultural and other aspects (cf. Kloosterman and Lambregts, 2001). Often cited examples of such polycentric urban regions are the Randstad Holland, the RhineRuhr Area and the Flemish Diamond. Some examples can also be found in other parts of Europe, for example the Italian Padua-Treviso-Venice and Emilia Romagna regions and in the Spanish Basque Country. These polycentric urban regions<sup>1</sup> are usually contrasted with large metropolitan areas like London and Paris. Such regional urban systems are referred to by various concepts that are largely synonymous, for instance 'polycentric urban regions', 'networked cities', 'polynucleated metropolitan regions' or 'city clusters'. Here, we will use the concept 'polycentric urban region'.

Literature on the polycentric urban region is still limited and rather unconsolidated (Bailey and Turok, 2001: 697). Consequently, a diversity of sometimes more or less implicit definitions, operationalisations and approaches of this type of urban configuration is still in circulation (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001: 623). It however attracts growing attention for already a decade or so by professionals of varied backgrounds, including academics such as geographers, economists and social and political scientists, and planners and policy-makers. The way academics and policy-makers respectively deal with polycentric urban regions differs to some extent. In general, the concept has both an empirical/analytical and a strategic/conceptual component to it. So far, empirical-analytical research has strongly focussed on the tenability of the notion of the polycentric urban region as a functional spatial entity. In spite of considerably regional variations, it is beyond doubt that the spheres of

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<sup>1</sup> Note that polycentric urban regions are not by definition of (sub)metropolitan scale. They also exist on a lower scale, for instance a system of smaller cities (up to 50.000 inhabitants each) acting on a regional scale. However, here we focus on polycentric urban regions comprising at least a million inhabitants.

influence of the urban centres in polycentric regions are increasingly fusing together and that these regions tend towards functionally integrated spaces. This is chiefly because daily activity and mobility patterns, in particular home-to-work trips, of individuals living in the adjacent urban centres continuously scale up and become more polycentric in shape (Clark and Kuijpers-Linde, 1994; Dieleman and Faludi, 1998; van der Laan, 1998). A more economic approach relates the spatial behaviour of firms to such polycentric regional urban systems (Camagni and Salone, 1993; Batten, 1995; Lambooy, 1998). A last approach deals with the 'regional discourse', i.e. the institutionalisation of such systems in both policy and society (de Boer, 1996; Blotevogel, 1998; Knapp, 1998).

In the debate on the polycentric urban regions among planners and policy-makers, more emphasis is put on strategic motives and action: these professionals consider the region an 'actor' rather than just a 'space' (cf. Keating, 2001). Against the background of the growing belief that the region is becoming the most important spatial level of international territorial competition, planners, policy-makers and other stakeholders view the strengthening of its competitiveness as the predominant purpose of strategic actions. Such stakeholders usually refer to 'high road' competitiveness, i.e. the creation of an environment that lures investments in hi-tech production and high level services, highly qualified manpower, and visitors with great purchasing power. Some planners even voice the ambition that the polycentric urban region should be able to compete successfully with highest level metropolitan agglomerations like New York, London or Paris: it provides economies of scale without incurring the costs or agglomeration diseconomies that these large metropolis entail. Bailey and Turok (2001: 698) state that "the PUR (*Polycentric Urban Region*) concept is alleged to offer a sound basis to promote regional economic competitiveness (...). It promotes the advantages of stronger interaction between neighbouring cities to develop specialised and complementary assets, while avoiding large-scale urban sprawl and destructive territorial competition". In order to develop and exploit such potential advantages of polycentric regions over their individual 'member cities', we consider voluntary but efficient co-operation and joint policy-making by the city authorities and other public and private stakeholders in the polycentric setting a very promising type of strategic action<sup>2</sup>. By emphasising this strategic action, a new dimension is being added to the conceptualisation of the polycentric urban region. This extended concept of a polycentric urban region not only includes the process of functional merging but also the developing of regional co-operation and co-ordination in a policy network in order to optimise the competitiveness of the whole. We define a regional policy network as a more or less institutionalised framework for co-operation, debate, negotiation and decision-making between relevant actors (public, private, interest groups) to define and implement planning and policies to improve the competitiveness of the polycentric urban region. We hypothesise that such a regional policy network rather than just a polycentric configuration, is required to shape the region's competitive advantages<sup>3</sup>.

Although the benefits of a co-ordinated regional planning approach have been acknowledged by stakeholders in several polycentric urban regions, examples of the development of frameworks for regional co-ordination and action are rather thin on the ground. This papers' main objective is to explore the question why such examples are

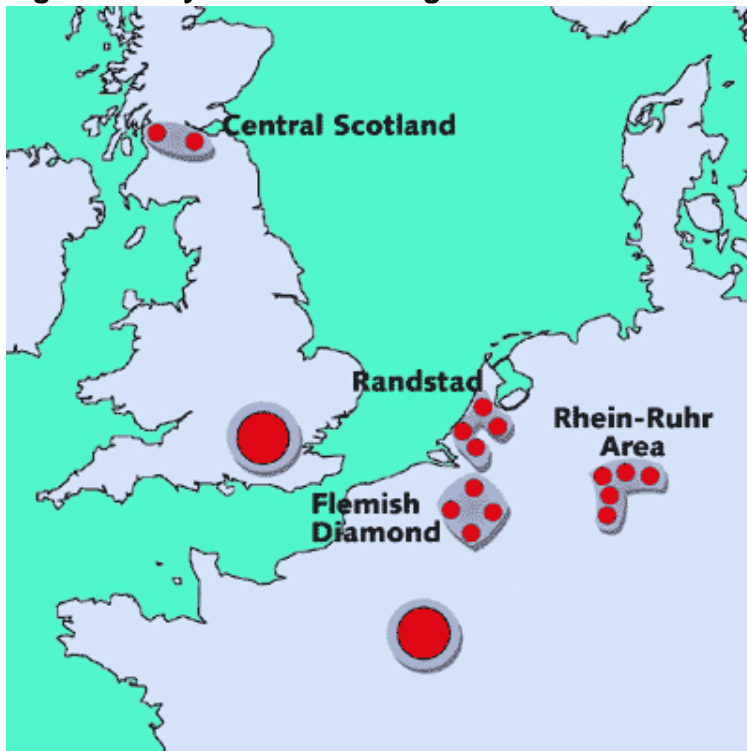
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<sup>2</sup> The alternative, namely adding an additional administrative tier that matches to the regional level (a kind of 'regional government') to the already existing tiers, is not taken into consideration here. This would be a too inflexible solution and would only aggravate the administrative bureaucracy.

<sup>3</sup> Co-operation by cities should not involve each economic activity or production factor in the region: it depends on the activity, sector or production factor whether co-operation or competition is the most efficient economic 'mechanism of co-ordination' (Tordoir, 2002).

the exception rather than the rule, in spite of seemingly apparent advantages of regional co-ordination and action. What are the obstacles to overcome on the road to co-operative regional policy networks? Generally speaking, we consider the institutional, political, cultural and spatial-functional contexts of regions crucial for the (absence of the) will and opportunities to build regional policy networks in polycentric urban regions. In section 5 we present a conceptual framework to analyse these contexts in connection with the development of regional policy networks. Moreover, by providing empirical evidence from four polycentric urban regions (Randstad, RhineRuhr Area, Flemish Diamond and Central Scotland, see figure 1)<sup>4</sup> we show how political-institutional, cultural and spatial factors interfere with the formation of regional policy networks. Our main 'benchmark' however is the Randstad as this region is regarded as a prime or classical example of a polycentric urban region (Hohenberg and Lees, 1985; Batten, 1995) and, more important, is home to several past and recent attempts to build regional policy networks. Prior to the presentation of the conceptual framework, we present some background information to underpin the hypothesis that co-operative policy networks benefit the competitiveness of polycentric urban regions. Section 3 presents a brief and general description of the process of growing functional integration of neighbouring cities in polycentric urban regions and section 4 gives an inventory of the competitive advantages and benefits of this configuration as a whole over its individual 'member cities'. The paper starts, however, with a brief overview of the notion of polycentric urban regions and co-operating networks as a strategic concept in the policy documents of the European Commission and some north west European states.

**Figure 1. Polycentric urban regions included in the EURBANET-project.**



Source: [www.urbannetworks.org](http://www.urbannetworks.org)

<sup>4</sup> These four regions are examined in the recently finished Interreg II-C project EURBANET. Both authors of this paper participated in this project.

## 2. THE POLYCENTRIC URBAN REGION IN SPATIAL PLANNING POLICY

Spatial policy-makers on a variety of spatial scales apply the concept of polycentricity, most explicitly on the European and the regional scale. In their evaluation of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), Faludi and Waterhout (2001) state that polycentricity forms the (only) key substantive concept of this planning document. One of the main policy aims of the ESDP (CEC, 1999) is the development of a balanced and polycentric city system and a new urban and rural relationship. In the European context, this means the creation of several “dynamic zones of global economic integration”, which will help to avoid further excessive concentration of activities, particularly high-quality and global functions in the current outstanding core area of Europe, the ‘pentagon’ defined by the metropolises of London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg. Supplemented by suitable policy measures to ensure a highly efficient transnational infrastructure and to improve co-operation and complementarity of regions, these regions’ economic potentials can be better utilised. This will be beneficial to the competitiveness of the whole of European Union (CEC, 1999:20-21).

The ESDP also pays attention to polycentrism on the lower scale of urban regions, the scale we are dealing with in this paper. The document refers to polycentric urban regions as ‘city clusters’ or city networks<sup>5</sup>. As policy options, it proposes to strengthen a polycentric and more balanced system of metropolitan regions, city clusters and city networks, as well as promoting integrated spatial development strategies for city clusters in individual Member States or in transnational and cross-border co-operations (CEC, 1999:21). Apparently, the European Commission favours the integrated development of polycentric urban regions.

In addition, the concept of the polycentric urban region has entered national spatial policy debates in several European countries and federal states. Generally, governments place great importance on such regions for reasons of international competitiveness. The integrated development of polycentric urban regions is often initiated by national or sub-national state governments rather than by the region itself. Examples of this concept, initiated by super-regional levels are the Flemish Diamond (Brussels-Antwerp-Ghent-Leuven) and the RhineRuhr Area (including cities like Cologne, Bonn, Dortmund, Essen and Düsseldorf). The Flemish Diamond was launched in the Flemish Structure Plan (see Albrechts, 1998) and the RhineRuhr Area was first designated as ‘European Metropolitan Region’ in the German Federal Action Plan for National Spatial Development (Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau, 1995) and later adopted by the Land of North Rhine-Westphalia (Knapp, 1998; Blotevogel, 1998).

The Dutch national government also pays much attention to polycentric urban regions<sup>6</sup> in their new spatial policy<sup>7</sup>, but has been, in contrast, actually spurred to do so by some of these regions. This is particularly true in the case of the Randstad; a ring of cities around a relatively open ‘Green Heart’ that includes Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Figure 2 presents an overview of designated ‘urban networks’. In the Dutch case, the policy is considerably far-reaching. The cities that make up the

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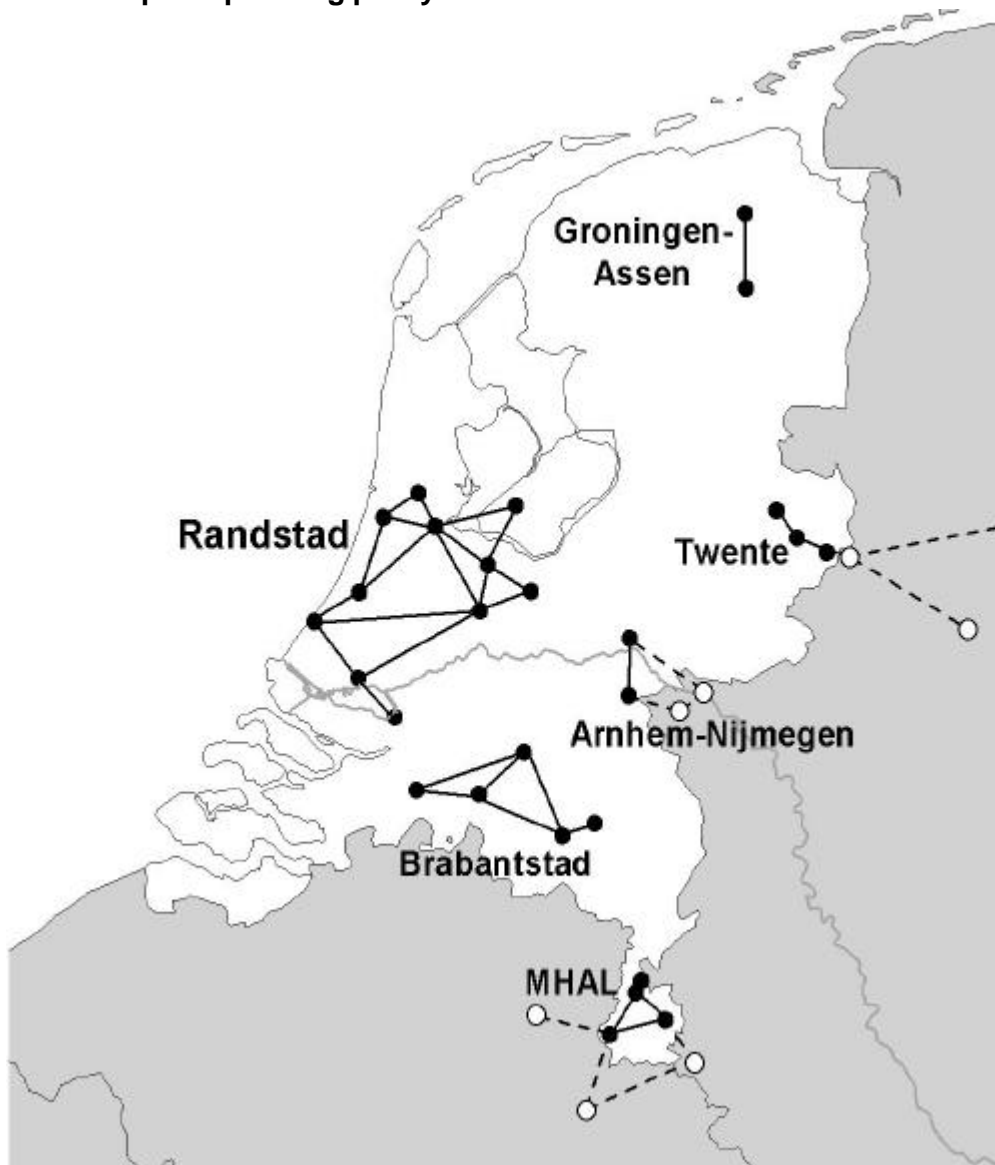
<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, the latter does not only include the polycentric urban region, but also (thematic) networks between more distant cities.

<sup>6</sup> Referring to them as *stedelijke netwerken* (urban networks).

<sup>7</sup> The Fifth Memorandum on Spatial Planning, which still has to be considered by the parliament. However, the concept of urban networks is well received.

polycentric urban regions are required to draw up spatial programmes and plans in mutual consultation while they also have to see to it that there is an integrated system of (public) transport. Such a policy puts much emphasis on co-operation. However, the way such regional co-operation and policy-making must be arranged remains vague in the policy document. This holds true for the other policy documents mentioned here as well.

**Figure 2. Designated polycentric urban regions of national importance in Dutch national spatial planning policy.**



Source: OTB.

### 3. SPATIAL AND FUNCTIONAL INTEGRATION OF POLYCENTRIC URBAN REGIONS

The benefits of a co-ordinated planning approach on the regional level are conditioned by a rather general tendency in the urban geography of advanced societies since several decades: the spatial dispersion of cities into urban regions. Cities show

ongoing processes of geographical extension and spatial scaling-up already for more than a century. In Europe, a transition can be observed since the 1960s<sup>8</sup> from urban patterns that were dominated by self-containing functional entities of a central city with its immediate hinterland, towards networking polycentric urban regions. Due to a predominant tendency of spatial de-concentration, most urban functions, i.e. residence, manufacturing, office-based sectors, retail, wholesale, warehousing and leisure services extended over increasing territories to new suburban centres or to places that are strategically located from a transport point of view. Although each urban function followed its own location logic and, hence, its own spatial pattern and timing of de-concentration, the outcome has been the emergence of multinucleated metropolitan systems. In fact, almost all post-industrial cities are now polycentric, with dispersed patterns of residential locations and multiple centres of employment and services.

Such general tendencies can also be observed in polycentric urban regions, where a number of central cities are located at close proximity. These cities have tended to coalesce morphologically and functionally into larger and dispersed regional urban systems. Two major tendencies are particularly relevant in this respect: the continuing emergence of new 'nodes' and motorway-bound types of development with particular specialisations, and the enlarging of the scopes and the thickness of the interdependencies between both old and new nodes (Lambregts *et al.*, 2001). Among such new nodes one can find planned new towns, edge cities 'European style', office parks and large commercial centres near airports, motorway-bound distribution parks, leisure centres and shopping malls, and science parks in attractive natural scenery. This widening variety of nodes is increasingly interconnected by infrastructure links and mobility patterns. The motorway-bound nature of some functions has created linear patterns within the dispersing urban system. The emerging mobility patterns reflect the expansion of the spatial scopes and the increasingly polycentric orientation of business relationships and people's daily activity patterns. Road infrastructure and private car dominate current mobility: it is in fact the automobile, according to many authors, that has brought about the coalescence of central cities and their hinterlands into larger polycentric city systems.

In many polycentric urban systems, the highest demographic and economic growth rates in recent decades have not occurred in the central cities but in new nodes in their surroundings. In many cases across the globe, such suburban centres now offer more jobs than central cities, if not individually than at least collectively<sup>9</sup>. The central city cores have not become obsolete, however. Although many have gone through deep crises due to industrial decline, the idea of a deserted 'doughnut city' is a parody, particularly in western Europe. Inner city areas, and more in particular their CBDs, have indeed lost some of their dominance, but have also more specialised. Often supported by purposive policies, many have lured specialised, small-scale retail outlets and a multitude of cultural and leisure services, which turned them into centres of 'fun industries' and the 'experience economy'. In addition, they still house many company headquarters and are the breeding ground of specialised office-based advanced producer services and knowledge based hi-tech industries that heavily depend on formal and informal information exchange by face to face contacts. In spite of the often voiced opinion that today's advanced ICT makes location choices rather elastic, enterprises in these sectors tend to agglomerate strongly. Nevertheless, the erstwhile dominant vertical, 'up-the-rent-gradient' patterns of functional relationships and mobility

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<sup>8</sup> In the USA, such processes could be observed several decades earlier.

<sup>9</sup> See Cervero (1995) for US cities, Brotchie *et al.* (1995) for Australian cities and Spencer and Frost (1995) for British cities.

between central cities and their respective hinterlands have been supplemented, if not replaced, with more horizontal patterns of criss-cross flows, including commuting across the network of nodes on wider regional scales. Generally speaking, the traditional functional hierarchy and duality between the city centres and the multitude of suburban places have eroded in many polycentric urban regions.

Some authors (cf. Blotevogel, 1998) label the current spatial order of regions, where the above described processes have been very evident, as 'post-Fordist'. In the words of Scott *et al.* (2001: 18) "... once rigid and clearly defined boundaries within such regions are blurring and the meaning of what is urban, suburban, exurban, or indeed rural or not urban at all, is increasingly ambiguous." The distinction between urban and rural areas has started to vanish in morphological, functional, cultural respects.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. POTENTIALITIES OF BUILDING REGIONAL POLICY NETWORKS

In some regions urban centres tend to coalesce into larger morphological and functional urban systems, in which spatial decisions on location and mobility by the major decision-makers, firms and households take into account wider sets of assets and broader spatial scopes than just individual cities. One may expect that such an emerging coherent polycentric configuration is a more appropriate entity of policy and planning than the individual cities it is composed of. It seems plausible that policies that aim at the strengthening of economic competitiveness on the strictly local level of individual cities make less and less sense if these centres are becoming part and parcel of a larger functional geographical entity that is still within the range of daily activity patterns. Competition by individual cities for investments in high-level services and hi-tech industries, for professional workers, for tourists with great purchasing power, and even for a marketable image, may leave unutilised opportunities that are offered by the larger regional system or may even led to wasteful effects like duplications. In their essay on the rise of global city regions, Scott *et al.* (2001: 13) observe that the "individual city in the narrow sense is less an appropriate or viable unit of social organisation than this regional networks of cities."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the importance of the region as an appropriate entity of planning and policy is not only rising relative to its individual cities, but also relative to the central state. Especially in Europe, where the ongoing process of unification is leading to a 'level playing field' for many areas of formerly national policy, more and more specific local and regional conditions of production required by globally mobile capital, cannot be arranged anymore by the central state. In summary, both responsibilities and opportunities for planning, policy and action in order to strengthen territorial economic competitiveness increasingly concentrate on the regional level of scale, at the expense of the local and national levels.

One of the projects that illustrates the above mentioned (section 1) growing attention by professionals, including planners, for polycentric urban configurations is the recently finished INTERREG II-C project URBANET.<sup>12</sup> Research findings of this project make it possible to distinguish three potentialities of co-operation and co-ordination in polycentric urban regions. Regional co-operation and coordination in these regions

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<sup>10</sup> The ESDP considers "the city and the countryside as a functional, spatial entity with diverse relationships and interdependencies" (CEC, 1999: 24).

<sup>11</sup> Scott *et al.* mention the polynuclear Randstad Holland as an example of a global city region.

<sup>12</sup> See also <http://www.urbannetworks.org>

may open the road (1) to pool resources in order to share facilities and services and to achieve 'critical mass', (2) to develop and exploit balanced complementarities, and (3) to optimise spatial diversity and to protect quality of open spaces. Defined so broadly, these three potentialities are more or less acknowledged in all four regions that are examined in EURBANET: the Randstad Holland, the Flemish Diamond, the RhineRuhr Area and Central Scotland. The case studies of these regions show that these potentialities of co-operation and co-ordination in polycentric urban regions are interrelated and partly overlapping, but together shape a wider array of qualities, including higher level qualities, than any of the individual cities is able to offer.

The first potentiality of a regional approach in polycentric urban regions is the possibility to effectively pool together assets that are spread across the region. This pooling together of assets provides greater agglomeration or external economies for businesses. On the scale of the region, businesses have access to larger and more varied pools of labour, suppliers, and customers than in any of its individual nodes or locations. Series of interviews with major stakeholders in the four polycentric regions examined in EURBANET reveal that the pooling of highly qualified professional labour is considered a particularly important advantage (Ipenburg and Lambregts, 2001). In some cases, the pooling of local labour markets may solve a situation of unemployment in one area of the region and scarcity of workers in another. The surplus value of co-operation within a regional policy network may consist of policy measures to improve labour mobility on the regional level. Physically, this involves fast and easy accessibility of the major centres in the region. But also the location of new business sites and residential areas on well-accessible locations. In addition, some interviewees also speak highly of the density, capacity and multi-modality of the infrastructure that make some polycentric urban regions, in particular the Randstad and the Flemish Diamond major gateways to Europe.

Next to the pooling of resources, the encouraging of interaction between neighbouring cities in a polycentric urban region may aim at specialisation in assets that creates competitive advantages over the individual centres. Where such functional specialisations are complementary rather than competitive, the polycentric urban region as a whole may offer a broader package of higher quality, metropolitan services to businesses, households, consumers and workers. These services may be advanced producer services; educational and R&D institutes; specialised types of retail; recreation, leisure and cultural facilities; and last but not least residential environments (Ipenburg and Lambregts, 2001). The ubiquitous presence, complementary nature and high quality of complementary services, universities, businesses and stakeholders in a polycentric urban region create a favourable environment for innovations, which is definitely a advantage in the competition for investments in its own. This is not to say that it is co-operation *instead of* competition that creates such a set of complementary local environments. Rather, it may be co-operation by public policy-makers, removing barriers against private competition (market imperfections) that is at the root of functional specialisation of places. Again, an adequate level of internal accessibility in the region is an important precondition, and hence a subject of policy co-operation, for complementary specialisations to be effective. Sub-optimal levels of access harm the opportunities for business people to exploit their business networks and for consumers to profit from local specialisation in cultural, leisure and recreational facilities that are spread across the polycentric urban system.

Basically, the improvement of the spatial diversity and quality of open space in polycentric urban regions is also a matter of pooling complementary assets. It is less related, however, to the presence of economic resources or socio-cultural services in

the polycentric region than the above examples do. The current tendencies towards dispersed and unbalanced patchworks of all kinds of “constructions, topographies and spaces, with elements of urban as well as rural landscapes” (Schmitt *et al.*, 2001: 18) that develop in the formerly unencumbered open landscapes of many polycentric configurations mean a downgrading of their spatial diversity and the quality of their open spaces. These tendencies must be judged negatively from the competitive point of view: it harms the variety of urban scenery and rural landscapes across short distances, which is considered one of the basic competitive advantages of polycentric urban regions over large metropolitan agglomerations. Avoiding such uncontrolled urban sprawl, and protecting the ‘green (and blue) networks’ for recreational functions require co-ordinated policy-making from a regional rather than a local perspective.

These three potentialities of regional co-operation and co-ordination in polycentric urban regions can be assessed against the background of the transition to the post-Fordist informational and knowledge-based economy and network society. With the rise of the knowledge-intensive economy, a new type of productive activities has become prevalent in many advanced urban economies. Unlike the Fordist manufacturing sector, firms in this type of activities are subject to rapid shifts in technologies and demands for products and have little opportunities to routinise and plan their production. Moreover, this makes their business environment too dynamic to “stay abreast in every field”: they have to specialise in activities and technologies that form the basis of core competences (Boekema *et al.* 2000: 9). Instead, they are organised so as to vary the mix of resources and skills needed on the basis of a permanent monitoring of shifts in the technologies and markets (Scott *et al.*, 2001). They are smaller in scale and depend on flexible networks that give access to a wide variety of supplies, formal and informal information, and last but not least professional and creative skills, that are outside their direct control. These flexible networks are crucial for innovations and the creation of ‘tacit’ knowledge, in fact one of the most important resources in the knowledge-based economy. Given the growing importance of skilled labour to create this ‘tacit’ knowledge, place competitiveness is increasingly based on high levels of quality of life that attract highly qualified workers and entrepreneurs in hi-tech industries and high level services. Post-Fordist tendencies such as a growing share of two-earner households, a widening variety of preferred residential environments and increasing levels of welfare, have widened the variety of qualities of residential *milieux* and leisure, recreational and cultural facilities, demanded by such professionals. Although agglomeration economies are reassessed by this new, ‘informational’ type of economic activities –the creation of tacit knowledge is ‘socially embedded’ and depends highly on face to face contacts-, regional policy networks that are able to create a pooling of complementary assets, interspersed with high quality open spaces, make that polycentric urban regions have competitive advantages over single cities.

## 5. A FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS THE FORMATION OF REGIONAL POLICY NETWORKS

Above shows that the formation of regional policy networks is required to optimise the potential advantages polycentric urban regions have, four of which have been acknowledged in the former section. Such regional policy networks could even be considered essential for exploiting some of these advantages. It is also observed however that examples of polycentric urban regions in which a regional policy network develops, are rather thin on the ground. Given the potential of regional policy networks,

it is striking to see that in many polycentric urban regions there is only limited interest in the development of such networks. For instance, initiatives to develop a regional policy network in the RhineRuhr Area – both morphological and functional a coherent entity<sup>13</sup> – are only limited. The same holds true for the Flemish Diamond. Although this polycentric urban region does appear in planning documents, one can hardly see a beginning of a developing regional policy network. Albrechts (1998) concludes that institutional coherence and co-operation within this region are rather weakly developed.

While the Randstad as a planning concept has occupied a central position in national planning strategies for the last 40 years or so, even there attempts to actually establish a regional policy network have not been successful. Most of the attempts entailed the introduction of a formal (fourth) tier in between the municipal and provincial tiers, but none of these attempts have proven to be political acceptable. The traditional Dutch three-tier system (national government, provinces, municipalities) has proved to be resistant to changes, making clear that a successful regional policy network should be based on voluntary co-operation. Recent bottom-up attempts have provided a new impulse to the formation of a regional policy network in the Randstad, some of them occupied with improving the (inter)national competitiveness of the Randstad. Most notable are the *Bureau Regio Randstad* (Randstad Region Agency), in which the four provinces in the Randstad co-ordinate their policies, and the Delta Metropolis Association, a rather informal body in which city authorities, district water boards, chambers of commerce and a variety of other private institutions meet and discuss the way the Randstad can develop into an European metropolis. Now that the national government published its new spatial planning policy there is some discussion on the formation of a regional policy network in the Randstad. The four Randstad provinces and the mayors of the four largest cities have expressed their interest in designing a co-operation structure in which the provinces, the four largest cities and the four matching formal city regions are represented. Tasks could be to put Randstad-scale projects on the agenda and to define a way of elaborating and implementing them (BRR, 2001). However, the value of these more recent initiatives still has to be proved.

Apparently, recognising polycentric urban regions and their potential does not result in the development of regional policy networks just like that. Here we will identify the constraints for developing a regional policy network in polycentric urban regions based on our experience in the EURBANET project. A clear starting point for this lies in the analysis of the current political, institutional, cultural and spatial context of polycentric urban regions and the way these interfere with the development of a regional policy network.

In building a more general framework to assess the possible constraints for the formation of regional policy networks in polycentric urban regions, we can partly build on previous research concerned with factors determining the potential for such developments. For instance, Van den Berg and Braun (1999) list seven factors contributing to urban organising capacity, which are: the formal institutional framework (the administrative organisation); strategic networks; leadership; vision and strategy; spatial-economic conditions; political support; and, finally, societal support. Keating (2001:379) describes the concept of a development coalition, a place-based interclass coalition dedicated to economic development in a specific location. From his political point of view, Keating claims that the context for building such a development coalition is determined by the current competitive situation of the region, but also by factors as culture, institutions, leadership, social composition and external relations. With respect

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance the results of GEMACA (1996).

to regions constituting themselves as an actor he remarks that institutions, leadership and an ability to carry a definition of the interests of the region are required. While regional policy networks are a way of developing organising capacity on the regional level instead of the local level and are more broad defined than just a development coalition, the factors named above provide clues for the components of the framework we need to analyse the context of the formation of regional policy networks. Irrespective of the precise categorisation used above, and basing ourselves on the EURBANET experiences, we are able to deduce three general dimensions that play a role in determining the feasibility of the formation of a regional policy network in a polycentric urban region: the spatial-functional dimension (which is quite specific for polycentric urban regions), the political-institutional dimension, and the cultural dimension.

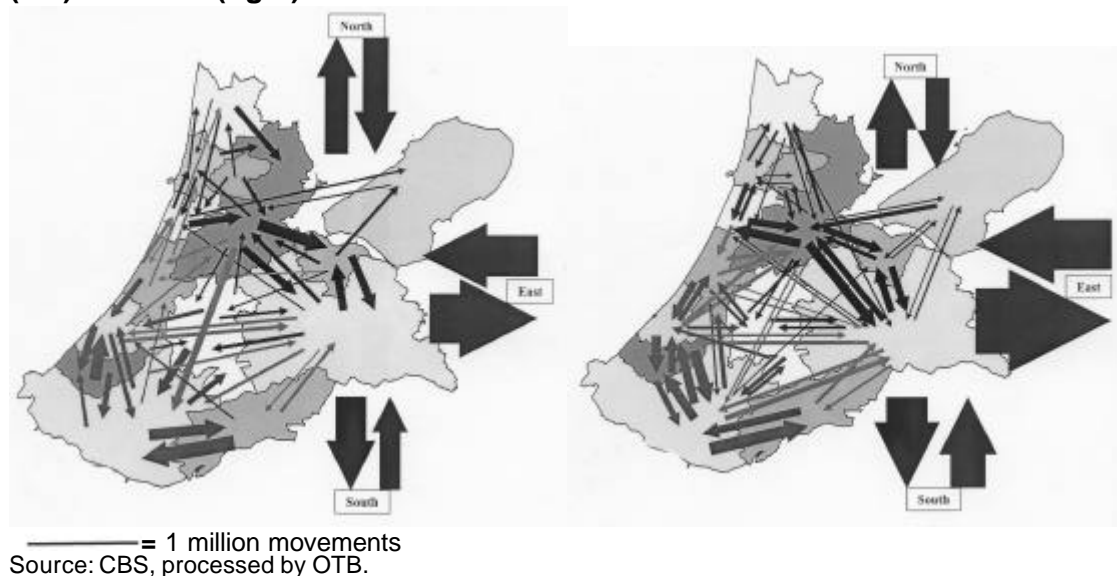
### **5.1 Spatial-functional dimension**

Previously, we mentioned the trend of polycentric urban regions getting more functionally tied together. We claimed that for polycentric urban regions in which there are many functional relationships and interdependencies, creating a regional policy network for efficient regional co-operation and policy-making is a beneficial regional development policy. Put in this way, there is a clear relationship between the spatial-functional situation in polycentric urban regions and the formation of regional policy networks. The further such a region is functionally integrated, the greater the need for, and the wider the tasks and activities of a regional policy network. Therefore, an analysis of the functional dimension partly explains whether or not regional policy networks are in existence and how they function. Clearly, there must be some spatial logic, or functional rationality behind the formation of a regional policy network. This means that actors (enterprises, public and private institutions, households) have to maintain relations throughout the region to fulfil their needs for production, consumption and personal needs. Authors dealing with this functional dimension often centre on daily flows of people, translated into 'travel to work areas', 'daily urban systems' (Van der Laan, 1998) or 'functional urban regions' (Cheshire and Hay, 1989). But the functional dimension encompasses more. According to Pumain (1999:6) a functional urban unit presents 'a concentration of people, activity, capital and buildings, constituted by markets of, for example, labour, retail, services, culture or housing. It is structured on major roads, railroads and terminals and functions by flows of people, goods, energy, information and money'. In sum, whether or not a polycentric urban region functions as a functional entity can be deduced from the spatial scope of markets, from the infrastructure and from flows.

The required functional rationality behind the formation of a regional policy network does not mean that a polycentric urban region needs to be one single, compact, functionally coherent and 'closed' system. Polycentric urban systems tend to be 'open' and multi-layered complexes of nodes, networks, flows and interactions of global, regional and local scales (Albrechts, 2001). Consequently, the spatial scope and spatial orientation of interactions between places do not coincide exclusively with the polycentric system as a whole. Rather, these scopes and orientations vary considerably between types of interactions and are dynamic; for some the network has become one single polycentric 'urban field' but for others it is either too large or too small. In a recent analysis of the labour market of the Randstad, van Ham *et al.* (2001) show that this urban system has become one single labour market for some groups of highly qualified, high income and mobile professionals, but is subdivided in several sub-regional labour markets for other workers. The labour markets of lowly or unskilled and less mobile workers do not even surpass the level of individual cities and their

immediate hinterlands. Similar conclusions can possibly be drawn for other functions, like housing, leisure and recreational services: the urban system is one single market only for some selective groups of its population. The tendency in the Randstad, however, is clear: regional spatial relations increase, strengthen and get more dispersed, while the spatial scope of functional markets (in particular labour, shopping, social activities, leisure and sports) is widening to a more regional scale, even though this is often not exactly the scale of the whole Randstad region (Hoppenbrouwer *et al.*, 2001). Similar tendencies can be found in the Flemish Diamond and the RhineRuhr Area. Figure 3 presents a view on the increase in travel for social visits between sub-regions in the Randstad. Social visits account for a large share (about 15% in 1999) of the total number of trips made.

**Figure 3: Travel for social visits between Corop-regions in the Randstad, 1986 (left) and 1998 (right).**



The fact that polycentric urban regions cannot be defined as single, closed functional units is also reflected in the multitude of interactions that cities maintain with cities in other regions. Some of their economic clusters, particularly those related to mainports (seaports, airports, or high-speed train stations), are connected even more strongly within international than regional networks. Policies and planning regarding the competitiveness of these clusters are not primarily formulated on the level of the polycentric urban region. This means that the regional policy network is the appropriate forum to formulate and implement policies only for some of the spatial issues in polycentric urban regions, while others can better be dealt with on different scales.

Keeping these necessary differentiations in mind we claim that, on basis of the spatial-functional relations and their tendencies, there is reason for building regional policy networks in the polycentric urban regions examined. Their range, however, should be selective with regard to the spatial issue at stake.

## 5.2 Political-institutional dimension

The attitude and vision towards government, and in particular spatial planning by administrators in the polycentric urban region are factors not to be neglected when it comes to the formation of regional policy networks. In general, many spatial issues

these days call for an approach that is formulated and implemented at multiple scales or across administrative tiers rather than at exactly one. Additionally, an increasing number of spatial issues are (or preferably should be) addressed through a governance mode rather than a governmental mode. The formation of regional policy networks requires the politicians and administrators to adopt a view on government and planning that puts emphasis on co-operation across administrative tiers, across administrative sectors and between public, private and (organised) interest groups, thereby taking into account that different issues call for different alliances with different spatial competencies and different life spans (cf. Boelens, 2000). Obviously, governing a polycentric urban region is an intricate affair. Putting such multi-level governance into practice is a complex task, even if politicians and administrators agree on its usefulness. There may be a lack of understanding on how multi-level governance works. Perhaps this partly explains the lack of ideas on the political-institutional dimension of spatial planning in the national Dutch planning policy.

Besides the attitude and vision of administrators and politicians, the formal institutional framework is critical here as well. The question is whether or not this framework leaves room for such multi-level governance. Often, it needs to be adjusted to be able to cope with the interfering and multi-level nature of urban dynamics. The existing frameworks are often too static and hierarchical to recognise and deal with this complex, multi-scalar interplay of trends and forces. During a long time, attempts have been made in the Randstad to add a formal administrative tier, but the existing institutional and political structure did not allow for that. It became slowly apparent that multi-level governance requires co-operation across scales and across actors, also involving private actors. The necessary adjustments (e.g. legislation, a formal redistribution of competencies) are only gradually implemented.

Albrechts (2001: 734) characterises polycentric urban regions as 'socio-spatial conflict zones for the articulation of multiple interests, identities and cultural differences'. While turning to the latter two in the following section, we will deal with the different interests in a polycentric urban region here. There is a clear need to establish common and shared interests for the polycentric urban region. This is far from self-evident as there are many fields where the interests of places and stakeholders in a polycentric urban region are different or even opposite. Regional disparities (between central cities and between a central city and its suburban nodes) in for instance demographic and economic growth rates, in social problems like poverty and unemployment, and in the attractiveness of residential environments make it for the places that are better off in these matters often not interesting to adopt regional policies that may adjust this situation. Actors in the Randstad have shown to be capable of defining regional interests. External incentives to do so have been important. These stimuli include the need to position the region externally as a metropolis, and the way the national Dutch government funds programmes of projects (chances for investments increase if the region successfully co-operates and clearly defines a desired investment programme).

Finally, leadership is important. The region's common and shared interests need to be picked up by leaders, who are able and willing to carry them on. Networks in particular need leadership as they lack a formal hierarchical structure. Such leadership can rely on specific competencies of key figures and key institutions or on the charisma of public or private individuals (Van den Berg and Braun, 1999). The influential Delta Metropolis Association for instance was initiated by a professor who convinced the mayors of the largest cities to start a regional discourse. Soon other stakeholders in the region followed.

### 5.3 Cultural dimension

The cultural dimension concerns the feeling of belonging together and the creation of cultural elements that help to perceive the polycentric urban region as an entity. In recent thinking on urban and regional development, much emphasis is placed on the cultural dimension. Social relationships, shared understandings, and norms of co-operation and reciprocity all ease regional networking. Sharp cultural divides on the other hand impose barriers to co-operation. Cultural discontinuities possibly reduce the opportunities for relationships and interaction. According to Faludi (1999), a common identity helps to achieve common, functional or strategic goals. Again referring to the quote of Albrechts (2001:734) above, polycentric urban regions are regions in which potentially discordant multiple identities and cultural differences occur. Following the distinction in culture and identity we split this dimension into two elements. The first one is a common culture and refers to the existence of a shared history and shared values, norms and beliefs in a region. Major sources of cultural differences are language, ethnicity, religion and political preferences. The second element distinguished is regional identity. This is a concept that is foremost a social construct and therefore a dynamic phenomenon. Moreover, it is a contextual and multi-layered concept. One belongs to many groups that together furnish one with a whole variety of discrete identities, which vary in relative or contextual importance. Some of these are linked to a geographical entity, for instance the neighbourhood, city or country one lives in, but probably also the region. The existence of such a regional identity in the polycentric urban region helps to generate societal support for the regional policy network.

As polycentric urban regions are not seldom the result of strategic thinking by planners, the regional identity in such regions is in general weak. But also cultural divides come to the fore in some polycentric urban regions. For instance, experiences in the polycentric urban regions of Central Scotland and the RhineRuhr Area show that cultural, if not psychological cleavages hamper the formation of regional policy networks. There are strong cultural cleavages between the Edinburgh and Glasgow urban areas and the Rhine and Ruhr areas respectively. In both regions, the most affluent areas, being Rhine and Edinburgh, are not very enthusiastic to be identified with areas with a reputation of economic downturn, unemployment and social problems. Moreover, the lack of a 'regional discourse' in the RhineRuhr Area adversely affects regional organising capacities. Lurking cultural divides can be found in the Flemish Diamond as well, as this polycentric urban region extends over an area consisting of two regions (Flanders and Brussels) that are not culturally homogeneous, for instance with respect to language.

The Randstad performs comparatively better when it comes to the cultural dimension, at least in the sense that there are no major cultural cleavages present. The existence of an official Dutch word for inhabitants of the Randstad (*Randstedeling*) even suggests some homogeneity. This, however, does not mean that the population and administrators have a regional 'Randstad' identity. This is because the Randstad lacks identifying power for various reasons:

- a. there is no undisputed official boundary of the region;
- b. there are no symbols (for instance special buildings, or a Randstad soccer team) connected to the Randstad-scale, except for one, its morphological form;
- c. institutions (public, private, societal) do not take the Randstad as their territorial organising principle, thereby not reproducing the Randstad concept in daily life;
- d. the Randstad is not a political arena, which also means that media are not directed to the Randstad-scale (no newspapers or regional television channels).

This lack of territorial, symbolic and institutional shape (see Paasi, 1996) and political space (see Keating, 1997) in the Randstad has not prevented that this region has a clearly established position in people's consciousness, especially in the way they mentally structure their spatial environment. So, while cultural factors hamper the formation of a regional policy network in Central Scotland, the Flemish Diamond and the RhineRuhr Area, this is not the case in the Randstad.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The concept of polycentricity is becoming increasingly popular in spatial planning and policies, including those on the European scale. Referring to the so-called polycentric urban region, a regional system of administratively and politically independent cities at close proximity without a clear leading centre, it is assumed by planners and policy-makers in the light of the post-Fordist economy that a regional policy network in which cities co-operate are more competitive than these cities separately. Regional competitiveness is a multifarious concept that involves both spatial and non-spatial issues. A recent survey among entrepreneurs in the Delta Metropolis (Randstad) reveals the ten most important location factors. These are the attitudes of employees and of public administrations, availability of personnel, levels of skills and wages, accessibility by road, telecom infrastructure, training and educational facilities, supply of residential milieus, and the quality of particular services (NEI, 2001). Regarding such issues, this paper explores the potential of a regional policy network over stand-alone strategies of cities making up these polycentric configurations. The appeal of the polycentric urban region concept lies in three potentialities:

- to pool resources in order to share facilities and services and to achieve critical mass;
- to develop and exploit balanced complementarities;
- to optimise spatial diversity and to protect the quality of open spaces.

By showing that all these potentialities require regional co-ordination and policy-making to make the best out of them, we made clear that the challenge for actors in polycentric urban regions is one of generating the regional organising capacity to be able to seize and use these potentialities. Such regional co-ordination in policy-making is best done in a regional policy network, i.e. some kind of co-operative regional forum, in which all relevant stakeholders in a polycentric urban region (different public actors, but also private market parties and non-governmental organisations) meet, discuss and decide upon planning policies and their implementation.

Despite the seemingly apparent advantages of the formation of a regional policy network to make use of the potentialities of polycentric urban regions, examples of such regions in which a regional policy network develops are rather exceptional. This paper explores the reasons for this. Basing ourselves on evidence from four polycentric urban regions in North West Europe, in particular the Randstad, we found that the formation of regional policy networks is conditioned by the spatial-functional, political-institutional and cultural context of the region. In general, the main constraints found in these regions can be categorised as institutional fragmentation combined with an internal orientation of key persons (such as politicians, policy-makers) and the lack of identification with the region at large.

Actors in polycentric urban regions and on other spatial scales (e.g. national) wanting to form a regional policy network must be mindful of these possible constraints and

deal with them strategically. Lack of functional coherence (or cultural, political-institutional) does not mean that the formation of a regional policy network is impossible. It rather poses limits on what is achievable in a first stage. In the situation where large political-institutional and or cultural constraints exist and where maybe also the functional coherence is limited, the best start would be a small start. In such a case, voluntary co-operation between a limited number of actors on simple, not too sensitive issues or well-defined projects with clear benefits to the individual actors is the best. Mutual trust, understanding and stronger working relationships will evolve, thus enabling the addressing of more complex policies and projects in a later stage. In cases such as the Randstad, where constraints are relatively limited, more structured co-operation yields more advantages. Here, a regional policy network in the truest sense of the word must be developed to make possible ongoing deliberation, debate, negotiation and decision-making by all interested parties on a wide variety of more or less complex projects and policies that benefit the competitiveness of the region as a whole (even though this sometimes requires concessions in the wider regional interest by individual actors).

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