

Urban sprawl in Europe

Europe is one of the most urbanised continents on earth, with approximately 75 % of its population living in urban areas. The urban future of Europe, however, is a matter of great concern. More than a quarter of the European Union's territory has now been directly affected by urban land use.

By 2020, approximately 80 % of Europeans will be living in urban areas. In seven countries the proportion will be 90 % or more. As a result, the demand for land in and around cities is becoming acute. On a daily basis, we all witness rapid, visible and conflicting changes in land use which are shaping landscapes and affecting the environment in and around cities as never before.

Cities are spreading, minimising the time and distances between them and in-and-out of them. This expansion is occurring in a scattered way across Europe, driven by changing lifestyles and consumption, and is commonly termed urban sprawl. Available evidence demonstrates conclusively that urban sprawl has accompanied the growth of cities across Europe over the past 50 years.

Urban sprawl occurs when the rate of land use conversion and consumption for urban uses exceeds the rate of population growth for a given area over a specified period. Urban sprawl should rightly be regarded as one of the major common challenges facing urban Europe today.

A recent pan-European study shows a continuing and rapid spatial expansion of cities: more than 5 % in a decade (Figure 1), equivalent to three times the area of Luxembourg. The areas with the most visible impacts of urban sprawl are in countries or regions with high population density and

economic activity (Belgium, the Netherlands, southern and western Germany, northern Italy, the Paris region) and/or rapid economic growth (Ireland, Portugal, eastern Germany, the Madrid region). Sprawl is particularly evident where countries or regions have benefited from EU regional policies and funding. New development patterns can also be observed, around smaller towns or in the countryside, along transportation corridors, and along many parts of the coast usually connected to river valleys.

The growth of cities in Europe has historically been driven by

increasing urban populations. However, today, even where there is little or no population pressure, a variety of factors are still driving sprawl. These are rooted in the desire to realise new lifestyles in suburban environments, outside the inner city.

The mixture of forces behind these trends include both micro and macro socio-economic trends. Quality of transport systems, the price of land, individual housing preferences, demographic trends, cultural traditions and constraints, the attractiveness of existing urban areas all play a key role in how an urban area develops. Another

key force is the application of planning policies at both local and regional levels. Fuelled by EU cohesion and structural funds to support infrastructure developments, sprawl has been accelerated in response to improved transportation links and enhanced personal mobility.

Cities, by their nature, are places where large numbers of people are concentrated in small areas. This has some evident advantages in terms of economic and social development. In some respects, it can even be beneficial to the environment. For example, land

use and energy consumption tend to be lower in urban areas compared to areas with dispersed populations. Urban waste and waste-water treatment enjoy economies of scale. Subsequently, traditional environmental health problems from unsafe drinking water,

Figure 1 Sprawl of urban and other artificial land development, 1990–2000



Source: Corine land cover database, EEA.

inadequate sanitation and poor housing have largely disappeared from cities within the EU. Nevertheless, the urban population still suffers from severe, localised environmental problems, such as noise exposure, high-impact air pollution episodes, waste management, restricted availability of fresh water and a lack of open space.

However, today's trend towards new, low-density urban areas is resulting in increased consumption. The amount of space consumed per person in the cities of Europe has more than doubled over the past 50 years. Over the past 20 years, the extent of built-up areas in many western and eastern European countries has increased by 20 %, while the population

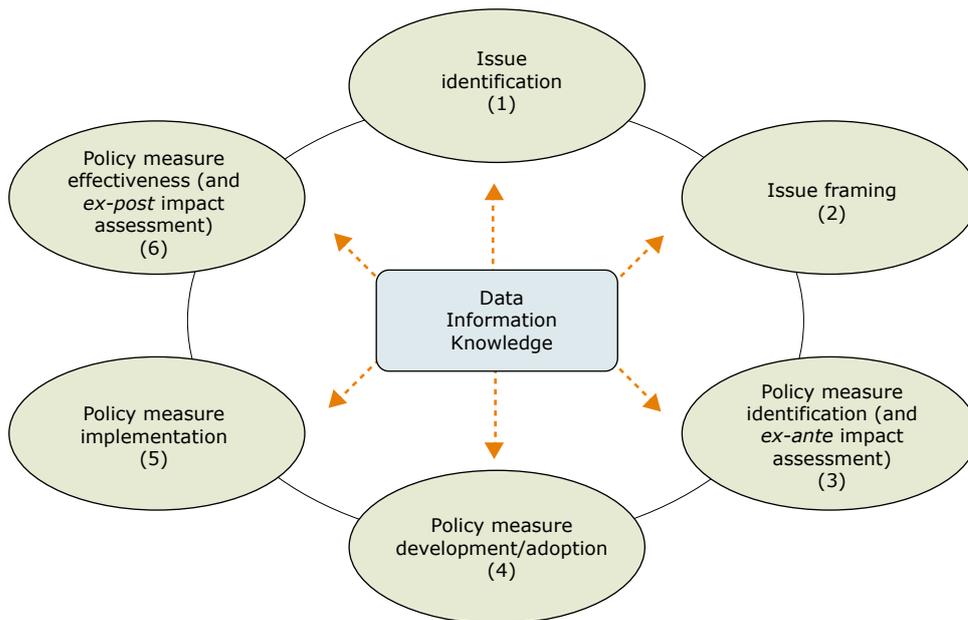
has increased by only 6 %. In particular, transportation (mobility) remains a crucial challenge for urban planning and management. Transport infrastructure impacts on the landscape in many ways. Soil sealing, which increases the effects of flooding, and the fragmentation of natural areas are just two.

Mobility and accessibility are key factors in European territorial cohesion. They are also essential elements in improving quality of life for communities. The number of kilometres travelled in urban areas by road transport is predicted to rise by 40 % between 1995 and 2030. Levels of car ownership in the EU-10 are still not at the same levels as the EU-15. This suggests further growth lies ahead.

If nothing is done, road congestion is expected to increase significantly by 2010 and the costs attributable to congestion will increase to approximately 1 % of EU GDP. However, there is more to transport infrastructure than simply adding kilometres of road and rail. Such infrastructure should be part of a global approach that takes into account the real impact of investment directed at creating and sustaining local and urban economies. It should be part of a balanced and polycentric development that reduces damage to the environment.

But the strategies and instruments to control sprawl strongly depend on today's realities of multiple and interacting levels of governance, from local to

Figure 2 Main stages in the policy cycle, supported by data, information and knowledge



Source: EEA.

European. This is particularly true with regard to the substantial financial flows that shape planning budgets. At present, planning policies often reflect the logic of the market. They would better reflect a vision of urban development, in which environmental and social considerations are fully embedded in spatial planning policies at all steps of the policy cycle from problem identification and policy design through to the implementation and *ex-post* evaluation stages. This could have several benefits including:

- ensuring policy coherence at all steps of the policy cycle (see Figure 2);
- enhancing cooperation between agencies across all levels of responsibility;
- making effective use of structural and cohesion funds at the EU level, in combination with environmental regulations, so as to avoid and mitigate sprawl;
- redressing the market failures that drive sprawl by acting on price signals for land, in, around and between urban areas;
- collating and sharing examples of good practice to develop compact cities;
- providing green areas in cities.

References

EEA (2006), *Urban sprawl in Europe – the ignored challenge*, EEA Report No 10/2006, European Environment Agency, Copenhagen.

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