

# POLYNET Action 3.1

## Analysis of policy documents & policy focus groups

### Central Belgium



# Central Belgium

Analysis of Policy Documents & Policy Focus Groups

Etienne Castiau Marcel Roelandts & Christian Vandermotten

Laurent Aujean

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Purpose of the report

#### 1.1.1 Purpose of this part of the study (Action 3.1) in the framework of the Polynet project

The purpose of this part of the study is to gain an understanding of current national and regional policies for the development of each region and their relationship to ESDP guidelines. A key research question is how the concept of polycentricity should be operationalised in policy-making practice. This needs an analysis of current national and regional policy regarding development of the region and its relationship to ESDP/NWE guidelines. Then, we will confront the two Polynet basic postulate (a) *“First, that knowledge-intensive advanced business services extend beyond the ‘global city network’ creating inter-linkages between other cities and towns in North-West Europe at a city-region scale leading to a new spatial phenomenon: the global ‘Mega-City-Region’”* and (b) *“Second, that knowledge-intensive advanced business service operations and flows are associated with a polycentric pattern of urban development in each Mega-City-Region”* - with our previous empirical findings and with the spatial vision of different important actors (outcomes of the policy focus group): public administration, firms involved in spatial planning, territorial planning organisation, economic and social council of each region, policy makers, academics, etc.

If towns & cities in NW Europe are interlinked by advanced business service networks global to local information flows virtual communications, business travel, it's necessary to develop an understanding of the policy implications of those changing spatial relationships, we need to point out public and private sector challenges in organising and guiding or constraining growth in polycentric regions and the relationship between spatial and policy developments and European Spatial Development Perspective priorities. Then, it's important to examine the policy context within which changes in advanced business service geography are occurring in each region, leading to the identification of key issues arising from the research that need to be taken forward in policy frameworks and the formulation of specific policy recommendations. At least, we should identify key recommendations for policy action and for the establishment of a co-operative Transnational Policy Network which will take forward the results of the POLYNET project.

In this part of the study we expected concrete results, concrete recommendations and not only theoretical considerations. How far and in what ways the concept of the global-mega-city-region is handled by national and regional policies developed by NWE member states? How to enhance flows through NWE global ‘gateway’ cities, promote balanced regional development? How to cooperate between city-regions to improve economic functional complementarity & exploit synergies for balanced growth? How to improve effectiveness of regional development strategies: supporting & extending flows, achieving common long-term sustainability objectives through active collaboration. Those questions are the framework to introduce the creation of a Transnational Policy Network to promote sustainable management of polycentric NW European mega-city-regions. It is a transnational communication platform: sharing knowledge, creating innovative policy approaches, promoting co-operation between cities & regions. We expect an added-value from this Transnational Co-operation on Policy: Joint working to widen participation in, spread benefits of, global flows & innovation, promote regional knowledge economies

### Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Analysis of Policy Frameworks for the Mega-City Region	4
3. Outcomes of the Policy Focus Group Meetings	6
4. Conclusions of the Policy Response Analysis	15
5. Key Policy Issues for the Mega-City Region	

---

### 1.1.2 Framework of recommendations from previous Actions

For lack of homogenous and comparable statistics on ICT-induced information flows and interconnections between cities, we had to rely on professional commuting and employment volume data to define the MCR (Action 1.1). It has thus not been possible to define MCRs according to the two basic postulates of the study. Commuting and employment volume, among the most classic criteria, neither prove that cities networks are structured by advanced services companies according to an information and knowledge fabric, nor that the MCRs function in a polycentric mode. We had indeed emphasized, in that part of the study, that commuting flows were undoubtedly much more important between FURS and cores of each city than between urban cores themselves or between FURS and cores of different cities. In a word, the image obtained reflected a self-centred rather than an inter-connected urban functioning.

Later, with the help of the methodology developed by the GWAC to analyse inter-urban connectivity, we tried to objectify the two basic postulates underlying the Polynet study, according to which the cities making up the MCRs were providers of intense information and knowledge exchanges in the advanced services sector and operated in a polycentric-cooperative mode. Beyond the outcomes and intrinsic interest of the resulting urban hierarchy, we pointed out that the GWAC methodology did overestimate the links between subsidiaries, while most of inter-company connections are in reality organized in a vertical way, via the hierarchically superior centres.

The second part of the Polynet study (Action 2) was aimed at confirming the results reached from qualitative interviews of managers of the largest companies in advanced services sectors (Action 2.1) and from the results of a web survey intended for their staff (Action 2.2). The interviews were aimed to better understand the concrete meaning of intra- and inter-firms links, the nature of those links and the operating mode between branches, branches and head offices, head offices and headquarters, companies and their suppliers, companies and their customers, etc. The web survey was planned to complete this picture through an analysis of the managers' agendas, business trips, communications, etc. of individuals from different firm departments.

Obviously, in Belgium, the MCR is dominated by Brussels and its numerous multinational companies offices, integrated in the international urban network. The urban hierarchy appears through APS firms' linkages: they have good connectivity between major cities, less good linkages between secondary cities. The urban hierarchy appears through APS firms' linkages: they have good connectivity between major cities, less good linkages between secondary cities. The Flemish triangle, Brussels-Antwerp-Ghent, appears as a clear element in the linkages of APS firms. There are good APS linkages between well-connected cities (like Brussels, Antwerp, Gent, Hasselt-Genk and Liège) but few links between less well-connected cities (like Mechelen, Brugge, Charleroi, Leuven).

The very strong regional structurations of the three Belgian Regions (Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels-Capital Region) are explained by the history of Belgium's economic development and its recent institutional evolution. *Wallonia*, faced with the heritage of its industrial past and a lack of advanced business services, experiences redevelopment problems. *Flanders* has a more favourable position as it benefits from a sound development dating back to the Glorious Thirty years, notably due to multinational investments. As for the Brussels-Capital Region, autonomous since 1989, it is enclosed in the Flemish territory and cut off from its natural hinterland because its morphological extension goes far beyond its administrative boundaries. The Wallonia and Flanders regions are strongly related to Brussels but not much with each other. What is more, the Belgian State, traditionally not very interventionist, has only been concerned about territorial planning since the sixties, if that within in a context of prosperity seen as unlimited and of functionalist, quite space-consuming visions, which did not favour a parsimonious management of space. The resulting intense periurbanisation has generated a commuting movement and cross-subsidization problems between cities and their peripheries, especially in Brussels where this problem is particularly acute since cross-subsidization tallies with regional divides. In such a context, the three Regions appear as obvious competitors rather than complementary entities within a cooperation network. Cooperation is indeed very limited between the three Belgian regions. This is why our recommendations will be differentiated as well as specific to each of them. However, some proposals will be aimed in an opposite direction and will try to outline a win-win cooperation pattern between the Regions.

---

## 1.2 Methodology

In Belgium, territorial planning falls within the Regions' competence, in other words, every Region is responsible for planning its own territory. Meanwhile, contrary to what happens in other countries where that matter is also a regional prerogative (such as in Germany), there is no structure for consultation, regulation or cooperation at national level. As a consequence, all depends on the Regions' will exclusively and, in a context of acute competition and selfish functioning, the Regions position themselves as rival rather than complementary in a win-win scenario.

Against this background, we were careful to refer to representatives of the three Regions in all fields concerned (government planning authorities, private sector trade, professional and business groups, experts, regional economic and social councils, research offices in land planning, academics, policy-makers, etc.) as well as to the rare national structures such as the "large cities policy cell", which makes part of the Ministry of Civil Service, Social Integration, Large Cities Policy and Equal Opportunities.

In order to be able to discuss with representatives of all groups concerned on an homogenous and comparative basis, we have elaborated a range of common questions, adapted to our interlocutors, according to the logic described in chapter 3.

# 2. Analysis of Policy Frameworks for the Mega-City Region

## 2.1 ESDP

ESDP has been discussed for a long time - since the 1970s - at European and Benelux level, and was affected quite a lot by the original goals of the European construction: improved European integration, also at territorial level, balanced regional development, etc. ESDP is the result of the big interventionist policies from a "neo-Keynesian" angle. Meanwhile, texts have evolved with time and some more recent changes have been added in a more "neo-liberal" sense, such as urban and territorial competition, etc. ESDP as it now stands wants to couple interurban cooperation with competition and territorial competition through the regulating concept of polycentrism.

At European level, polycentrism is clearly the expression of a political will to counterbalance the heavy trends affecting in metropolisation of activities and to give medium cities the opportunity to reach a balanced territorial growth in terms of sustainable development and better European spatial integration<sup>1</sup>. The second structural sketch of Benelux included another objective, namely a regional development based on a polycentric urban network. This means, as regards Belgium, strengthening the Belgian urban network as a polycentric one.

Three major topics appear in ESDP: (a) creation of a balanced urban polycentric network in Europe; (b) equal access to knowledge and transport infrastructures; (c) protection of natural and cultural environment, and of territorial diversity.

In broad outline, ESDP considers the concept of polycentrism according to the following three axes:

- 1) *Polycentrism is seen as a spatial development strategy*, not as a mere descriptive or analytical model that allows distinguishing polycentric from monocentric areas. It is considered a strategy aimed at a sustainable and balanced spatial development.
- 2) *Polycentrism aims at reinforcing the regions through territorial cooperation*: Territorial Cooperations between medium and smaller size Cities and/or agglomerations that are within certain proximity will make them stronger, more economically potent in the competition with other larger cities or regions within the EU.
- 3) *Polycentricity is acknowledged to lead to a balanced, sustainable development through complementary centres*: According to the concept of "polycentricity", a network of complementary smaller and medium size cities relieves the dense centres of concentrated development from some of their burdens (social expenses, traffic...). This is accomplished through redistributing development to the complementary locations where development is desired in designated focal areas. In return, by taking over some of the development dynam-

---

ics, smaller and medium size cities are given the chance to participate in the economic advantages by taking over some of the functions of the centres of the larger cities. This strategy is assumed to lead to a balanced, sustainable spatial development.

We should now examine if and how the concept of *polycentric sustainable development* is reflected in regional development schemes.

## 2.2 SDER (SCHEMA DE DEVELOPPEMENT DE L'ESPACE REGIONAL WALLON)

One should remember that the first draft of the Walloon territorial plan did not include Brussels contrary to the Flemish plan, the RSV! This was absurd, if one considers the number of Walloons who work in Brussels and spend their income in Wallonia and the influence of Brussels on the Walloon Brabant, but is understandable if one considers that the demand for federalisation was born from the Wallonian side as a reaction against the crisis of the old industrial fabric historically managed from Brussels, the seat of the Belgian capitalism ! (on the contrary the demand for federalism from the Flemish side was born on a more cultural point of view and Flanders consider Brussels as an historical Flemish city even if the very large majority of Brussels' population is now speaking French).

During the 1980s, polycentrism appeared under an approximate form in this first draft of the Walloon territorial plan presented at this time by the SDRW (Société pour le Développement Régional de la Wallonie). It was called the *Polyville* concept. This concept is based on the notion of total shared centralities, with a small specialization between the four big cities of Wallonia<sup>2</sup> and networking as an urban driving force, thus without considering any city outside Wallonia. The *polyville* considered the four urban entities as a single city, not the addition of four separate and specialized entities. However, that concept never was implemented.

In general the SDER was inspired by the ESDP. Even the term polycentrism is not specifically included in the SDER, its philosophy has largely developed because the same team worked on both the ESDP and the SDER. This philosophy can be detected at different levels : (a) abandoning the old 'hierarchical towns network' concept ; (b) the 'Euro-corridor' concept ; (c) the 'cooperation agreement' concept and so on. Also the strategic vision of the urban network inside the SDER is polycentric : 4 important towns lightly differentiated (Liège, Charleroi, Namur, Mons) and about fifty other entities for which the SDER only defines their main function. It is true that the SDER never explained that the 4 big cities should cooperate together but the SDER warmly recommended that any plan for one city needs to be considered within the wider framework of the Region as a whole. The SDER also defined some trans-regional 'cooperation-areas' that included all the big national city poles (Brussels) or external poles (Lille, Maastricht, etc.) around the Walloon Region. This cooperation is managed directly by the Walloon Region and not by the cities immediately under the influence of these big cities, so that it is possible to have more weight in the negotiation.

Now, the SDER, as approved in 1998 by the Walloon government, modified strongly this view on the development of the Walloon urban pattern. In a post-industrial situation, it considers fortunately that Wallonia is not an island and recognizes the importance of the links with cities outside Wallonia, which are better endowed in high level tertiary sector and APS. The relative underdevelopment of the Walloonian cities from this point of view is the product of an heavy industrial history and is a very big challenge for the redevelopment of Wallonia. Therefore, the SDER considers the importance of transregional cooperations and transregional or international synergies : between Walloon Brabant, Central Hainaut and Namur with Brussels ; between Western Hainaut and Lille, for Liège with Maastricht and Cologne, for Arlon with Luxembourg. It gives a rather dismembered picture of a Walloon region torn between or polarised by its big neighbouring poles, which is in fact the reality.

## 2.3 PRD (Plan régional de développement of Brussels-Capital Region)

The notion of polycentrism is quite inadequate referring to the Brussels case, as the Region is limited to the central part of a metropolitan functional area. However, polycentrism is mentioned from a theoretical point of view as we refer to the SDEC but it is not used at an operational level, except maybe at the level of the interregional cooperation agreements... But the latter, even if they are diverse and varied, have not produced concrete results except lately, through the cooperation agreement on the funding and the introduction of the RER<sup>3</sup> and, for

---

some time, transborder cooperation agreements at European level<sup>4</sup>.

## **2.4 RSV (RUIMTELIJKE STRUKTUURPLAN VLAANDEREN)**

On the contrary of the initial Wallonian reluctance against Brussels, Flanders included from the beginning Brussels in its planning concept, for evident political reasons ! The urban network concept in a polycentric sense is much represented in the RSV<sup>5</sup>. On one hand, through the idea of a “concentrated deconcentration”, which means the redeployment of population and some activities on existing nodes in order to reinforce the urban fabric and to avoid more urban sprawl in a very densely populated area. Notably, the Flemish Diamond, including Brussels, is conceived as an integrated urban network at European level, able to compete with other first rank urban networks such as the Randstad, the Ruhr, London, the Paris basin, etc. The Flemish Diamond is a powerful marketing reality aiming at selling that territory to investors, etc. But we can also find in the RSV a view of polycentric networks at a more microgeographical level such as cross-border cooperation between Courtrai and Lille or between Cologne-Liège-Hasselt-Genk, the urban coastal centres network, the Hasselt-Genk dipole, etc. Today the polycentrism concept is expanding and is more and more considered in the territorial planning policies in Flanders.

# **3. Outcomes of the Policy Focus Group Meetings**

## **3.1 Policy focus group and framework of discussions**

Numerous discussions with several representatives at national and regional level, in all fields concerned, took place according to a common pattern in order to be able to elaborate a homogenous and comparative basis of analysis. The common questions, adjusted to the respondents, are reported in appendix.

## **3.2 Key issues emerging from the meetings**

All discussions were quite fruitful and improved the understanding and the deepening of problematics related to polycentrism. Experienced men and women, field workers, leaders, all of them have addressed this problematic fully, with objectivity but also through very concrete examples. Among all the questions posed during the discussions, we have selected some reflections centred on different thematics quoted hereafter. However, in the following report, some considerations may appear as quite contradictory as they reflect the individual views of the interviewed persons.

### **3.2.1 Polycentrism, a diversely understood concept**

We have questioned our interlocutors on the concept of polycentrism and compared their answers with the meaning of polycentrism as it appears in the ESDP documents. Although they are rather familiar with the concept itself, its meaning can vary quite a lot.

For some of them, polycentrism is just a morphological concept without any functional actuality. Others see it as a morphological as well as a functional reality. Such oppositions are obviously bound to the theoretical positionings toward polycentrism (see hereafter).

In a general way, all respondents were relatively aware that the concept of polycentrism represented an answer, an alternative pattern to a centralised urban network with its diseconomies of scale (congestion, car-induced paralysis, pollution, etc.). Similarly to the idea of a European economic convergence, it was postulated that the growth was induced by the big cities of the world, which placed Europe in the international competition but that this growth should be more homogeneously distributed and balanced on the whole of the territory according to a polycentric, non organized into a hierarchy, and cooperative urban network which also represents an interface with the neighbouring rural areas. Polycentrism is meant to be a concept of European territorial structuration in all senses of the word.

Quite surprisingly, only one of them underlined the fact that polycentrism might correspond to a functional evolu-

---

tion of the city, which, originally, concentrated all functions on a central point, while the political, economic, intellectual... decision centres are more scattered today. It is precisely this underlying reality that should be taken into account and promoted.

Each of the participants considers polycentrism on his/her personal scale, from global urban structure (rarely quoted) to transcommunal, if not infracommunal, cooperation, via the supraregional level, which is the level related to in the Polynet study. The scale referred to by the respondents is generally the scale on which they work, which sometimes results in problematic discussions as the phenomena, questions and solutions considered can be completely different. This is how one of the respondents, speaking of Brussels' reality, highlighted the reality of polycentrism at the level of the 19 communes of the Brussels-Capital Region: one political power and micro-economic power places in each of the communes (traders' associations, small business enterprise centres attached to neighbourhoods such as the rue Dansaert, Molenbeek, etc.).

One of the participants pointed out that the notions of inequalities or spatial balance regarding growth are neither right-wing nor left-wing. On one hand, it is unanimously recognized that growth is not equal everywhere and, on the other hand, as for considering this fact as positive and thus to be encouraged, or negative and to be fought, it does not depend on ideological divides (left-wing F. Perroux defended growth poles). Divergences are rather found lower down: what do we do with this growth? How will it be distributed socially, regionally, etc.?

### 3.2.2 Polycentrism: myth or reality?

Several interlocutors have questioned the very notion of polycentrism. Is it really a new trend in spatial organization resulting from the development of knowledge economy? Does one note a change in spatial behaviours of firms as a consequence of the massive emergence of ICTs? Which is the pertinence of MCRs? Do they actually operate in an interconnected and cooperative way?

The answers to those questions varied quite a lot, from the most enthusiastic supporters of polycentrism to its most critical opponents, not counting more subtle judgments according to the fields and the actors concerned. The principal reflections can be summarized as follows:

After the presentation of the methodology and results of the Polynet research study, some participants believe it does not show in a sufficiently convincing way that MCRs really operate in a polycentric mode as a result of an increased inter-connectivity between firms in the advanced economic sector. Indeed, MCRs should have been defined in accordance with the initial postulates of the study, from criteria showing the effective interconnectivity between the different urban centres. However, the definition adopted is based on extremely classic criteria such as professional commuting and employment volume, which in no way represent cooperative polycentrism. Moreover, the analyses conducted a posteriori within the MCRs in order to prove this interconnectivity are not convincing. The GWAC methodology, probably better adapted to the global level, overestimates the connections between local head offices and the more so as one goes down the hierarchical levels of the global firms (national and regional levels), where the hierarchical links are probably even stronger than between branches at international level. Besides, the GWAC methodology only covers part of the firms network economy as it only concerns the relationships between different head offices of a firm and does not consider the firm's *external* interrelationships with suppliers, clients, subcontractors, partners. The web survey did not produce conclusive results either. Finally, the interviews, though interesting in terms of lessons drawn about the spatial logics of firms, do not show any obvious polycentric functioning of the MCRs, not to say they invalidate it in many ways.

We have explicitly asked our interlocutors to give their opinion on the two basic postulates of the Polynet study, namely: (a) *"First, that knowledge-intensive advanced business services extend beyond the 'global city network' creating inter-linkages between other cities and towns in North-West Europe at a city-region scale leading to a new spatial phenomenon: the global 'Mega-City-Region'"* and (b) *"Second, that knowledge-intensive advanced business service operations and flows are associated with a polycentric pattern of urban development in each Mega-City-Region"*. Several contributors claimed the introduction of ITCs would bring about increased mobility, scattering and delocalisation of activities. Inversely, some said it would result in increased centralisation<sup>6</sup>. Others still saw this emerg-

---

ing trend as dependent on the sectors concerned and the processes in action (concentration of decision-making tertiary sector but delocalisation of productive processes for example<sup>7</sup>). In its basic postulates, Polynet should have addressed this problematic instead of taking a stand on this issue in a definite sense.

If all agree that the new economy did change the internal organisation of firms (increased flexibility, improved stock and just-in-time management, quicker connection with subcontractors, etc.), none of the respondents, considering his/her own professional experience, could testify a change in behaviour, organisation or spatial localisation of the firms. This is particularly problematic because, either all interlocutors – though quite concerned by those issues and processes – are unaware of a fundamental evolution (and in this case, it would be urgent to work actively for their education), or the very postulate of the Polynet study should be questioned!

Only one respondent evoked a change in the spatial behaviour of firms, though in opposition with the Polynet postulates, when mentioning the idea developed in professor Veltz's works, namely that the decrease in communication time reinforces spatial concentration rather than dispersal. According to this interlocutor, this process explains the continuing general concentration phenomenon of economic activity and the urban comeback of certain activities. If industrial activities are faced with important de- or relocation processes, this is not due to the introduction of ICTs. This is rather the result of the generalised Fordism, which allows a spatial segmentation of the production process between the design-management-administration-marketing of a product and its production, and which continues today through the increase in subcontracting and the global segmentation owing to a growing international division of labour.

As regards the last point, one of the participants, Peter Cabus, referred to an empirical study he had carried out in firms located in the Flemish regions on behalf of the Ministry of economic affairs. The study consisted in analysing the firms' structuration and their spatial mode of interaction with suppliers and clients, that is to say spatial relationships with *external* partners, not the *internal* organization of the firms (the links between different head offices of a firm as in the GWAC methodology<sup>9</sup>). The survey was conducted on a large scale (more than 5000 firms out of 20,000 answered the questionnaire<sup>10</sup>). The polycentrism concept is debated in the light of the survey results, as is the relation/confrontation between firms networks and urban networks as defined in the territorial planning schemes. The results are particularly interesting as regards the problematic we address.

On the one hand, P. Cabus criticizes the "*morphological polycentrism*" approach, which considers a recognized fact that a multipolar urban structure on the map corresponds to a functional network structure between those urban poles. According to him, nothing is less certain. A preliminary study of the spatial relations between firms is necessary to prove this. It cannot be postulated that urban networks coincide with firms networks and systematically match them. These are two different things (even if linked in several ways). To demonstrate this mismatch, P. Cabus took as an example the connection networks of Antwerp's firms- and he calculated, in the total relations external to Antwerp, the part of the "Flemish Diamond" (the study was focused on that area). That part proved small (30%), as the majority (70%) of the external connections of Antwerp's firms network took place outside the *Flemish Diamond*! In other words, it is not because the cities constituting this *Flemish Diamond* (Antwerp, Alost, Brussels, Ghent, Leuven, Mechelen and St-Nicolas) are geographically and morphologically close to each other on the map that they represent a functional polycentric network! The *Flemish Diamond* concept as created by the territorial planners is thus just a marketing concept aimed at promoting Flanders rather than a tangible reality if one considers the actual functioning of firms networks! Firms do not operate within a pre-defined urban network as planners believe. They take advantage of the territorial assets offered by agglomerations but their choices as well as their logics depend on the actors, not on territories. It is therefore completely wrong to think that, by developing polycentric urban networks in some geographical zones (MCRs), one will be able to help enterprise enter the networks and the organization of private actors in this urban network! Firms cannot be forced to function within a network to which they do not belong! They will of course make use of the infrastructural investments required for the establishment of those urban networks but those infrastructures will not be optimized in their real functioning. Territorial planning bodies start from the *territory*, while they should start from the *actors* and examine the latter's spatial behaviours before coming back to the territory in order to plan and organize it better. It is not very serious to start from the territory and to assume the existence of a functional urban network on the unique basis of a morphological multipolarity assessment (yet this is the Polynet approach, ndr)! P. Cabus declares he has hardly seen a pertinent study proving that a polycentric urban network presents a coincidence

---

between morphological and functional levels. For example, as the polycentric urban network concept is very strongly present in the RSV, the Flemish Region's authorities have launched studies to try and prove that morphological urban networks also operated as functional networks in reality. . . , but those studies were never concluded as they could not prove anything! Meanwhile, this concept is still very present today even if it has now mainly become a principle that guides the spatial organization of public actions and actors. This "organizational" principle takes root so deeply that the RSV now point out the necessity to introduce an internal network management (such as what Polynet claims at European level; 'an action plan for the establishment of a transnational policy network') aimed at an optimum organization of the Flemish Diamond's urban network in a polycentric sense, that is by developing complementarities between the urban centres of the *Flemish Diamond*. Thus, the assessment of the existence of a morphological network has given way to a (non demonstrated) functional network concept, but today things are evolving in such a way that there is a will to introduce an "organizational" concept by means of an internal management of the urban network. In conclusion, Peter Cabus underlines that a regional policy should be implemented which, first of all, would focus on actors and not on territories. In other words, instead of starting from a presupposed network functioning within a given space (as Polynet does), one should study precisely how the different actors are integrated in a given space in order to, on this basis, bring out a regional policy. Indeed, the results obtained by Peter Cabus highlight the reality of a networking economy in which networks do not correspond to the planners' territorial networks but to networks specific to the actors that are integrated in those territories. This is the harshest criticism expressed by Peter Cabus toward polycentrism, which, in his opinion, wrongly postulates a network functioning of the territories.

On the other hand, this networking economy at firms level does not specifically result from the generalization of ICTs (even if the latter can reinforce it), but rather from increased subcontracting combined with a refocusing of firms on their 'core-business'.

Finally, P. Cabus stresses that the concept of polycentric urban network only makes sense if there is a complementarity and a cooperation between the different cities of the network, a sharing of assets/specializations of each city in the MCR (as is postulated in the polycentrism theory). Yet several empirical studies have shown (in Belgium and in the Randstad for instance) a very high similarity in the economic structure of the cities, and a reduction of their differences in the course of time. The polycentrism theory reminds of the theory on international trade, according to which the latter was based upon specializations between the different national economies (woollen fabric in England and wine in Portugal), while the reality shows that, with time, more and more similar goods are exchanged.

Some extracts of the study are reproduced in footnote<sup>11</sup>.

P. Cabus also points out that, in his opinion, the polycentric urban model is a variant of the Christallerian model, which is mainly aimed at consumers and thus cannot be applied to producers. In this case, we are faced with a much more polarized and multi-scale structure. Most of the existing urban models are based upon the consumers', not the producers' behaviours, so that there is a logical contradiction in applying a model brought out at consumers' (polycentrism) level in order to promote a more dynamic policy at producers' level.

P. Cabus believes the secondary cities should not expect too much from polycentrism in terms of delocalization of functions, activities or investments from big urban centres. Instead they should create strong centralities based on an endogenous development. This is the only way to be incorporated into a network of superior cities. In this field, success depends on the contributions brought. Being in demand or dependent is doomed to failure.

Beyond the general lessons drawn from this study, some participants underlined a series of results which question the presuppositions of the Polynet study, notably concerning the sectors chosen, which are supposedly large consumers of ICTs and of network cooperative work. . . *"It is obvious that financial services, business services and smaller firms have the strongest local orientation, while TDL (Transport, Distribution and Logistics), manufacturing industries and larger firms have higher export rates"*. The industry seems to have been quite early a large consumer of ICTs and network organization through the international division of labour and increasing subcontracting. *"Local output counts for 10% and the rest of Flanders for 20% of total sales. Customers in Brussels and Wallonia are responsible for 11% of total output. As a result, the manufacturing industry in Flanders has a prominent international character"*. Why then focus on the business service sector (except logistic)? Isn't there here a wrong association between knowledge economy and office work? Wasn't tertiary work long characterized by low productivity gains? And as the use of ICTs

---

takes so much place in the basic postulates of the Polynet study, a deeper reflection should have been led, focused on the largest ICT consuming economic sectors. The sectors selected in the Polynet study do not always appear as the most pertinent. *“This local focus confirms the agglomeration theory, underlining the importance of agglomeration economies for this type of activities. These data confirm that business services are not co-locating extensively with their (industrials) clients, but with their partners or rivals in the same business because they can reap the advantages linked with the geographic concentration of central functions”.*

In its theoretical concept, the polycentric model recommend either a de-congestion of big urban centres with a transfer on close cities in a cooperative mode, or the creation of a cooperative network of complementary cities in order to reach together a superior level of functions, services and infrastructures which each of them could not reach separately. Both cases imply a spatial specialization between the different functions, infrastructures and services offered, as well as a cooperation between the different cities so as to better share them. This poses a double interrogation: (a) is this not promoting a normative model which does not fit the reality of urban development with its different hierarchical levels of corresponding functions, infrastructures and services, in particular in cities with a weak tertiary basis which are not very attractive for APS and where polycentric development doesn't allow to reach any basic level of attractiveness ? (b) does the promotion of a new urban polycentric configuration as the one defined express a reality, an emerging trend, objective necessities (see above and below)? Indeed, there are only two possible solutions: either an anticipative attitude toward an emerging trend – and it is then legitimate to promote and regulate it-, or a normative attitude at the risk of imposing a spatial structuration that does not meet the needs of the actors. In conclusion, the promotion of a polycentric urban development is seen by some interlocutors as a break with the constituted urban network: a structuration made of cities of successive hierarchical levels with, at each of these levels, the corresponding functions, facilities, services and infrastructures.

Quite obviously, a third configuration is also possible. The present urban development as historically formed might be impossible to develop and lead to a deadlock. The envisaged polycentric alternative might also be not much desirable in the opinion of most actors in the present, although it could become a necessity in medium and in long term if we want to preserve a sustainable and balanced development of the European space. If such is the diagnosis and such the conclusion, a very strong political will will inevitably be needed (cooperation in sharing the service supply, voluntarism in the specialization between different cities, sharing of resources and infrastructures between urban centres, etc.), coupled with substantial financial means, in order to “impose” this new polycentric structuration of the European space. However, firstly, the predominant ideas and policies today are less “regulationist”, less “interventionist”, and reflect the opinion that the free play of the market and competition forces are a better way to bring solutions. Secondly, in these days of every man for himself (the English *“I want my money back”*, Schroeder's *“The German money will no longer solve European crises”*, or the French tension regarding any reassessment of the CAP, etc.), it is very hard to find the financial means for large medium and long term projects as would imply a voluntarist introduction of a new structuration of the European space directed toward a polycentric pattern. In short, aren't we dreaming, or, more prosaically, given the present context of deregulation and lack of financial means, will the call for more polycentrism not be reduced to its “liberal” aspect only, involving more urban competition and leaving its more regulationist side, to the detriment of a sustainable and balanced development?

Many participants questioned the tangible reality of cooperative urban polycentric networks: are there any conclusive examples? Literature on Randstad Holland stresses the current climate is dominated by competition rather than cooperation. On a more sectoral scale, the cooperation attempt between Paris and Amsterdam-Brussels Stock Exchanges has failed to the benefit of London and Francfort, two traditional markets. Another participant, talking of his experience in the negotiations on the SarLorLux (Sarre, Lorraine, Luxembourg) development scheme, underlined that “each man for himself” trends were permanent. Others pointed out that, when some cooperation forms were taking shape, most of the time it was within the framework of asymmetric-dissymmetric relationships, as in the large Grootstad project in Lille, or in the case of Arlon-Luxembourg synergies, where Arlon is considered a mere land reservoir, or the Belval project developed on an industrial waste land by the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg: this project turns out to be unilaterally conducted, without consultation or partnership with neighbours, although these conditions were provided for in the development schemes of the area, etc. Many participants underlined polycentrism was much debated but concrete reliable examples were missing, so that the concept remained more theoretical than real. Some of them

---

proposed literature reviewing in order to collect some successful examples, if any. Yet another told of concrete aspects of successful cooperation actions in the Liège-Heerlen-Aachen-Maastricht area, notably the “Pays de Herve” and the “Trois Pays” park projects, but it seems that this success was only possible because a supracommunal (a superior authority) logic could be found, which reduced selfish trends (it is the Walloon Region that chairs the Leading committee of the Trois Pays Park). On another scale, through creating activities, the periurban Brabant around Brussels is slowly becoming an entity that lives and generates activities for itself, but it is at an intra-metropolitan structuration level and not reducing simultaneously its dependance on commuting to Brussels.

### 3.2.3 Is polycentrism a reality in the Belgian MCR?

In a general way, considering the institutional situation in Belgium and the resulting constant tensions between communities, all the interlocutors agree that polycentrism, which supposes a high inter-urban and inter-regional cooperation, is not a realistic solution at the level of the Belgian MCR. At the very most, it could be a solution in Flanders or in Wallonia – though with Brussels as regional capital in the latter case – or at infra-regional level.

As for Wallonia, one of the academics underlined that modern economies in Europe, America or Asia, are organized in big urban metropolises, whose economic and political weight is bound to increase. Besides, this is the model China has just opted for. Brussels, whether one wants it or not, has become the economic capital of Wallonia, as shows its growing sphere of influence, which justifies the prosperity of the provinces like Walloon Brabant, taking advantage of it. As for the Flemish, they have understood the decisive role played by that city open to the world. Consequently, the choices made by Wallonia seem anachronica as the corollary of this trend toward metropolisation of activities is a spatial concentration of public and private means. A sensible governance would have meant that the Walloon authorities take part in this heavy trend. Meanwhile, Wallonia has followed the exactly inverse policy by dispersing its different authorities in several cities, resulting in particularly pernicious effects, not only because this deconcentration infringes the necessity of focusing the means, at regional scale, on the most profitable issues, but also because those effects reinforce the local barons phenomena. Obviously, Wallonia lacks a strong capital. It is hardly conceivable to concentrate all strengths in one of the four Walloon cities for political reasons of subregional competition and for strategic reasons as any size would be insufficient. It is also not much rational to imagine Wallonia might pull through thanks to interurban cooperation of polycentric type, on one hand because this will scatter its already weak means and, on the other hand, because the geographically lined up configuration of the four Walloon cities does not predispose them to form a densely interconnected polycentric network. Our interlocutor does not see a Walloon enterprise, faced with multiple needs in terms of investment, financial advising, exportation, R&D, etc., being forced to scatter in different places where those services will be present. A central place regrouping all those skills and services would be preferable.

As regards the Brussels-Capital Region, some interlocutors call for an intra-urban polycentrism, for example, the scattering of the big urban functions in different places. They think that this could allow a better distribution of the load of mobility flows and maybe bring people closer to their workplace, but on the contrary the PRD is in favour of the concentration of the main offices districts on the main railway stations to favour public transport. Other people think also that keeping alive 19 municipalities inside Brussels-Region doesn't favour coherent and strong urban policies, due to competitions between local authorities and the Brussels government. Even if an interlocutor advanced this idea, it doesn't seem credible that this kind of intra-urban polycentrism could favour local employment. On the other hand, a deconcentration of some Brussels functions or services to the benefit of peripheral nodes is judged unrealistic given the resistance that will arise. No city would like to see its functions and influence decrease, in particular in a federal context with no transfers of fiscal revenues between Brussels and the two surrounding Regions.

For one of the participants, Belgium is a republic of cities rather than a kingdom. Hence, everything that tends to increase the power and/or prerogatives of cities such as polycentrism is positive, in any case better accepted than in very centralised countries such as France, but is in fact more considered as a gain of power by the cities than as a better way of regional or national governance. The decentralisation of the administrative bodies is already very strong in Belgium.

---

### 3.2.4 Polycentrism: to the benefit of whom?

In the eyes of some participants, the localisation of services and infrastructures giving access to a superior scale in terms of market size would be less determining in the case of big firms as these can always have access to information and services. Polycentrism would thus be rather intended for independent workers and small or medium firms, which need a proximity support to have access to the markets of higher size. Polycentrism would thus correspond to a will to promote an endogenous development based on local assets, reinforcing the local urban fabric and a balanced regional development.

Others, on the contrary, believe the cities' participation in an urban network will benefit the large enterprises more than small ones, the latter having a territorial network much more limited, when not mostly local.

### 3.2.5 Participants' opinion on how polycentrism is seen by the different actors

Globally, all interlocutors agree polycentrism requires a voluntarist action as, whoever the actors are, cooperation most of the time has to be induced as it does not come spontaneously. Sometimes cooperation is the result of a marriage of convenience: when larger cities put them in the shade, the cities under influence are then capable to lead common actions, but the general trend remains unchanged: everyone for himself, competition, will to have all possible jobs, the whole range of services and infrastructures, etc.

The average citizen would not be interested in polycentrism. On the contrary, he would even reject it in many points: restriction of the freedom to build his house where he wants to, multiplied moves toward diverse urban poles while he wishes to have all services he needs at his disposal in a single central and easily accessible place, etc. In Belgium, the city remains unsuccessful. The average Belgian's dream is to leave the city as soon as he can and to buy his detached house in a remote place. Only Ghent, a city with a very effective urban renewal policy, and some newly gentrified central districts in Brussels seem now succeed in turning down the image of a hideous city and attracting new residents.

What enterprises expect from polycentrism would be more efficiency, saving time, improved management of mobility, etc. But these gains would be essentially true for multilocalised firms. As regards independent workers, small and medium firms, a polycentrism at infraregional or intraurban level could help supporting the local economic development. However, the majority of the participants agree that most of the firms are always in search of agglomeration effects and scale economies. In these lean times marked by restrictions, they also fear any sprinkling that would disperse the competitiveness efforts requiring critical masses concentrated on target objectives. According to some interlocutors, big firms control the market on the largest scales, contrary to small and medium-sized firms. Polycentrism in this case could facilitate the latter's connection to international networks.

Policy makers are responsible in front of the electors of a determined place (commune, regions, provinces). They are mainly interested in the maximum development of that place. It is therefore difficult to have them approve the idea of complementarity/cooperation implied in the notion of polycentric spatial development. Hasselt-Genk for example has been said to make up a dipole and that the assets and complementarities of both of them should be promoted. In practice, competition and splitting in two of infrastructures are the rule. In the same way, it was declared that there should be a complementarity between Aix-la-Chapelle, Liège (with the TGV station) and Maastricht (with the airport). But practically, if Aix-la-Chapelle and Maastricht have reached an agreement on the airport, Liège has developed the airport of Bierset, and so on! Paradoxically thus, polycentrism resulting in increased (economic, decision, etc.) powers at the inferior levels of the urban hierarchy needs in fact a relatively strong central power to implement it and organize the sharing of competences and complementarity between the different urban centres. In the absence of such strong and regulating power, polycentrism is wishful thinking: selfishness will give birth to more and more uniform cities, and the (too weak) central authority will drive away the polycentrism idea to the benefit of a sprinkling that will satisfy everyone.

### 3.2.6 Is polycentrism able to solve some current problems?

Some participants have stressed that, if one compared the advantages and disadvantages between a centralised and a polycentric urban structure, the globally positive balance would not necessarily be in favour of the polycentric

---

structure. So, most probably, a polycentric structure would multiply the pressure on the environment (increased micro-moves, diseconomies of scale in some infrastructures or services, etc.) and would result in a lesser profitability of infrastructures and services, whose number would have to be multiplied, etc. It is not obvious that the burden, as regards environment, traffic congestion, scale diseconomies, is less important in the (more polycentric) Randstad than in the (more monocentric) Paris Basin. Some interlocutors then proposed a well-thought-out mix between the current structure and a polycentric structure on the basis of an accurate study of the different advantages and weaknesses in a range of fields. Others did not agree and retorted that Germany, which has the most polycentric urban structure, has best respected the Kyoto Protocol agreements, notably in reducing carbon dioxide emissions. German cities have a cultural activity much more important than small or medium Belgian or French cities. The fact of having a cultural capital that is totally dominant such as Paris, is somewhat prejudicial to periphery life, while in Germany every city can develop a diversified supply. The same is probably true as far as a range of economic activities are concerned, which could flourish more easily in a polycentric environment with smaller, more stable entities as they would be based upon stronger local dynamics, with more proximity than in anonymous large urban centres. Several participants have shown a great interest in this comparative exercise.

Some assert that polycentrism could diminish the commuting volume through moving jobs closer to the commuters' residence places. This is however not obvious, for different reasons: (a) if the labour pool of an urban firm is localised throughout the periphery, it is not easy to determine an optimum localisation within this periphery, unless one forces employees to move closer to the new offices; (b) the families' trajectories are more and more unstable and multiple; (c) finally, an increase in very diversified job supplies is only possible in urban regions. Thus, if some Brussels firms delocalize toward the periphery, the reverse is also true, notably in the case of firms having previously moved to the periphery which in the end decide to come back to the city. The main reason evoked is the availability of labour, especially qualified labour<sup>12</sup>.

One of the officials in the field of territorial planning in one of the three Regions of the country pointed out that, if polycentrism probably offers a number of advantages, it is very difficult to implement it concretely. He stressed the very big difficulty, if not the impossibility, at the time his regional territorial plan was elaborated, to determine, on one side, which activities should be kept in town, which should be attracted, which should go to periphery, which could be allowed or even encouraged to leave, and, on the other side, the firms' localisation logics: should the firms of a same sector be grouped together? What are the localisation factors according to activity sectors? Etc. In front of the results of several empirical studies, the participant expressed his administration's confusion: in the end, it was as clear as mud! It is thus difficult, if one wants to introduce a spatial policy in a polycentric sense, to determine correctly what should be kept centralised, what can be decentralised, what should be regrouped in one place, etc. It would be dangerous to apply a general logic, whereas reality is much more complex and diverse.

Some interlocutors said that polycentrism could be able to solve part of the urban costs financing problems (today cities and centres are generally under-financed), through decentralisation, cooperation and sharing between several urban centres. This does not seem obvious in the current period. Besides the institutional problems in Belgium (in Brussels for example, where the regional boundary does not match the morphological city boundary), the problem is more general. Indeed, during the referenda in Amsterdam and Berlin on the creation of a province-city, those projects were rejected, essentially because they posed the question of budget cross-subsidization between the city and its scope of influence (increase in taxes in the periphery). In Canada, the State has imposed the merging between Montreal and its periphery to counter the periphery population's refusal to take part in the financing of the city. Also in Canada, a series of basic urban services are financed directly by the central State and do not depend on local taxes. This could solve the problem of some Wallon communes, whose instinctive reaction is to deplore, in the absolute, the arrival of urban residents on their territory, through these are necessary for their budget!

### **3.2.7 The supporters of polycentrism, seen as a permanent reality to be promoted**

Some enthusiastic participants with polycentrism underlined the absolute necessity to promote this view of the spatial organization of the territory. Their main arguments were the following:

The centrality view is a theoretical view that does not match the historic nor the current reality of urban devel-

---

opment. The Middle Ages cities, ancestors of all our historical cities, are far from being all represented by radio-concentric maps. The three powers were almost systematically separated from a spatial point of view and did not meet a centrality logic. Castles most of the time were tangent to the ramparts, etc. Later, the King's palace was not located in the centre of the town but often outside; barracks weren't either in a central place. When looking at old Brussels maps, at a time when there was nothing around, one can notice that the different activities were scattered everywhere, not concentrated in the centre. The notion of centrality has appeared with people like von Thünen, who have reduced structuration to a single function: the minimisation of the distance-time from the central market place. It was a quite reductionist view of reality. The very centralised cities of the present day are for a great part the result of those theoretical views: crowded functions in the centre, coupled with spatial planning views elaborated from those centrality patterns, while in reality there is no objective necessity for those functions to be located in centres! It would be interesting to do the following exercise: selecting all functions which really require a central localisation, even a single one, and the others. The supporters of polycentrism declare the result would be surprising: one would see that mega-capitals like Paris or London are not absolutely necessary, as Germany's urban structuration shows. Indeed, Germany, where no global city can be found, is not for all that less connected to the world. At this point, the idea that openness to the world and the inclusion of an economy in globalisation processes involves the existence of a global city as big as London or Paris, should also be relativized.

They say that if the supporters of centrality insist on scale economies, productivity gains, etc., they forget the huge economic and ecological losses (as proved by many economic studies) due to traffic jams and congestion (waste of time, pollution, etc.). Of course centrality gains are generally positive for enterprises, and costs are socialized at society level, but if one considers the global scale, the results are not favourable for a hyper-centralisation of activities. Today, with the multiplication of communications and their lower costs, it would be possible to reach a more polycentric organization while keeping the advantages of centralisation (videoconference, network cooperation, home working... are some solutions to reduce commuting to central places, etc.). However, contrary to this affirmation, it could be questioned if this decentralised and multidirectional mobility could be organised efficiently with public transport, in particular by rail.

Always for the supporters of more polycentricity, it is generally postulated that all functions are, or should be, concentrated in the centre. But, on closer examination, there are not many urban functions that absolutely require a central function. Moreover, a careful analysis of the present situation already shows a strong dispersion of a lot of functions in secondary centres, such as universities, hospitals, research centres, peripheral trade centres, etc. Polycentrism adds another dimension to this situation by promoting cooperation, allowing thus to reach a critical mass in order to improve one's position in interurban competition at superior levels. It would be wrong to see polycentrism as a way to satisfy everybody and to disperse all functions and infrastructures in all urban centres. Polycentrism cannot be dissociated from complementarity and from specializations of urban centres, otherwise we will sink back in waste and sprinkling.

It would be wrong to set cooperation as promoted by the SDEC against territorial competitiveness, also promoted in the SDEC. Interurban competition stimulates interurban cooperation too. This must be seen on several scales. For example, Lille competes with Brussels but, in the competition between London and Paris, Lille is eager to be associated to Brussels. There are all kinds of cooperation/competition plays that take place on various scales and can stimulate the urban development and urban policies. *Competition* is the basis from which the necessity of *cooperation* appears. In this way, rival positioning strategies can take the form of cooperation strategies even within dissymmetric relationships. This is what happens with cities of different scopes which have hierarchical and domination relationships but which consider they have a common lot as they belong to the same space. The example of Lille is eloquent: Tournai is quite aware of Lille's domination but realizes that cooperation with the Lille urban region can be interesting. As a consequence, Tournai positions itself not as a dependent city but as a partner which can bring Lille a specificity. The French have soon understood this interlocking play and have called their transregional project Grootstad. They are the leaders but they can only be if they recognize and respect the others as their partners... and this seems to function all right. But one should also admit that the union process between cooperation and competition/competitiveness creates a kind of prioritized polycentrism, which is not exactly the same as what is expressed in the SDEC, which divides cooperative polycentric structure and hierarchical centralised structure. In addition, this "*competition/coopera-*

---

tion” process is quite evolutive and not very compatible with medium or long term territorial planning projects. Overall, polycentrism supporters highlight it is a means of escaping centres-periphery/dominant-dominated relations even if, as we have seen, such relations can reappear in different reduced forms. Supporters claim polycentrism is much more adapted to the European urban morphology, thus more operational.

Correctly understood polycentrism cannot be dissociated from the notion of centrality! Opting for polycentrism does not amount to giving up centrality and densification, as polycentrism does not mean urban sprinkling leading to undifferentiated spaces. Polycentrism is associated with the notion of “critical mass”, which means making solid choices in infrastructures and functions sharing, organizing interurban complementarities and going on promoting concentration-densification of secondary urban centres.

Correctly understood polycentrism should be based on a *bottom-up*, not a *top-down* approach. Just like what the French are currently doing now in the Lorraine ridge where, instead of drawing up “planning contracts”, they make “urban networks” contracts, which basically consist in saying “you are willing to act. Well, just tell us what you can do together and your project will be supported”. The same is true regarding aid for the creation of enterprise clusters in some sectors and regions.

The scattering of functions between urban centres would allow to move commuters closer to their work places. In this connection, it is interesting to note that, if commuting to Brussels goes on increasing, commuting from Brussels (+/- 10%) also increases and so do commuting distances, above all in central communes, not in peripheral ones. This means that people who live in central communes go to work further and further away. This is coupled to the fact that the rate of car ownership of the city centre inhabitants is growing considerably!

The RER plans, at this stage, are in contradiction with a polycentric development spatial pattern. The RER is designed to serve the North-South railway link and the Luxembourg and Schuman railway stations. These stations serve 30% of the employment in Brussels. As travelling between residence and work place represents 25 and 30% of total travelling, the RER is consequently planned to meet 9% of the travels. Moreover, its principal consequence is that it will make the centre closer to periphery and probably will result in increased population flight from Brussels, exactly the contrary of what is expected (people coming back to the city). Finally, the larger accessibility to the centre will most likely push up office prices in Brussels.

## 4. Conclusions of the Policy Response

### 4.1 Introduction

There is a mismatch between the political pace (short and sometimes medium term) and the tangible results of any decision in the field of spatial planning (medium, and especially long term). Whatever spatial development scheme is foreseen, it requires a prospective view and solid long term planning.

Polycentric spatial development presupposes a strong control and regulation of the process<sup>13</sup>. Polycentrism requires voluntarist actions, which are very weak in Belgium indeed. Whoever the actors, cooperation should be more often promoted as cooperation comes rarely spontaneously.

Considering Belgium’s institutional background and the conflicts between the Regions, it is obvious that the recommendations will be different for each of them. Meanwhile, we have carefully put forward some recommendations at national level.

### 4.2 National level

Territorial planning is a regionalised competence, this cannot be ignored. But two things are lacking: on one hand, a place and a structure where the cities of the country could speak to each other and compare their experiences, or even try to solve some common problems together; on the other hand, a way to be able to reach common positions at European scale. So it would be advisable to set up, as in Germany for example, a national structure, even if purely con-

---

sultative (such as a panel of experts or representatives from the different regional entities), where transregional questions would be discussed, where experiences could be shared and the problems affecting the three Regions as well as Belgium's position in Europe would be debated. This proposal aims at reducing the climate of acute competition and every man for himself and at promoting cooperation and complementarity within a win-win scenario to the benefit of the populations concerned. As Belgium is a very small, very dense and much interconnected country, it doesn't make sense to consider urban development at regional scale only, but however it is the legal reality in Belgium and this has no chance to be changed in the future, on the contrary. Therefore, even if one considers that an urban policy should be introduced at federal level, with increased financial means and competences, it is very strongly unlikely, even with only a view to increased cooperation, comparison and exchange of experiences, solving of common problems, etc. In short, the purpose would be to bring the cities round a negotiation table and make them progress together in the field of the big urban issues they are faced with (periurbanisation, communications, security, restoring of the social cohesion in the neighbourhoods, etc.). Considering the tensions between communities and the strong resistance toward a federal approach, it would be desirable to implement such a policy step by step, not through a top-down approach that would immediately be rejected, but through a bottom-up approach, starting from very concrete common problems facing cities, and to give them the possibility to conduct common policies at national level. In this way, one could for instance copy the European model and create a fund for partnership between cities from the different Regions to help initiatives related to polycentrism. That fund could be used after submission and evaluation of common projects (on condition of being minimum three cities from the three different Regions with a common valid project). Competences should thus be very much increased or, if this is not possible, at least the initiative capacities of the political cell of the big cities at national level. But that seems more a wishful thinking that a likely future in the Belgian context.

Almost all cities of the developed countries are faced with under-financing, a general phenomenon that has been differently dealt with, either by the creation of "urban communities", "province-cities", administrative merging between city and periphery, cross-subsidization mechanisms or shared taxation between residence and work places, federal financing of basic urban services, etc. It would be advisable to develop a reflection on this thematic regarding Belgian cities, Brussels in particular.

Regarding this under-financing question, a solution could consist in regionalizing property taxation, and maybe the rent policy, because these are two essential fields in a sound urban management.

Whereas according to the law cadastral incomes should have been revised every 10 years, they haven't been since 1975! Those incomes have only been adjusted in the early 1990s but on the basis of the 1975 situation. This is particularly unfair for the cities, as the tax base has nothing more to see with the reality of property incomes, notably because the income levels in 1975 were higher in the centre than in periphery. Today, thus, cadastral incomes are lower in the peripheral communes and in the (richer) periphery than in poorer city centres, as the reference is still the year 1975!

Polycentrism can only be envisaged with a will to densify the existing cities and to promote a dense network of inter- and intra-urban public transport at the risk of multiplying Brownian individual travels (short distance journeys between different centres) and failing integration and structural complementarity.

To meet multiple challenges, including the preceding one, the densification of residential housing should be maintained and reinforced. Its dispersion should be avoided as it is much space and infrastructure consuming and does not allow a profitable network functioning of public transport. One must make citizens feel like living in cities again and make those places pleasant to live in.

As the promotion and management of polycentric urban networks could mainly benefit large enterprises, policies should be developed to support small firms and give them access to international enterprise networks, otherwise they will soon lag behind or be taken over. The threshold of market accessibility is higher and higher, this is why young enterprises should be supported from their start.

### **4.3 Regional level: Brussels-Capital**

Even if it will be politically very difficult, try to set up a structure, even if it is only consultative, of scientific expertise or any other acceptable solution from a Community point of view, at functional Brussels metropolitan level, so that all

---

stakeholders of the Brussels problematic can meet and discuss possible solutions. If possible, develop cooperation agreements between Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia.

Tend to a standardization of tariffs between the Regions regarding public transport and stop the absurd competition on some Brussels links between the three regional public transport companies. Favour cooperation between Brussels, the federal State and the surrounding Regions to develop quickly effective public transport for commuters, without encouraging Brussels population to periurbanize.

#### **4.4 Regional level: Wallonia**

Reinforcement of the links with the capital of Europe, the only international city that allows openness to the world with sufficient visibility.

In order to avoid sprinkling and subregionalism and to make targeted bets on the different cities according to their endogenous potentials, two things are necessary: on one hand, a very constraining action allowing to bring out, if not impose, clear choices, and on the other hand, an opposition to local resistances. Indeed, each urban decision maker believes his own centre must at least include a university, a law court, the most complete range of infrastructures, which produces surpluses and diseconomies of scale.

The current trend which consists to put on the market land not available for housing until now, should absolutely not be pursued. It is important to densify residential housing, avoid its dispersion, give the citizens renewed urge to live in cities. Political measures has to be taken to oblige land owners to put land on the market in the present potential building areas and to struggle against land retention.

#### **4.5 Regional level: Flanders**

The RSV recommends a concentrated deconcentration (demarcation of agglomerations in a narrow belt), of inhabitants as well as economic activities, but we must admit that we already lack space today for economic activities in different places of the Flemish Diamond (as in Antwerp, Mechelen, in the Brussels-Antwerp corridor, etc.). Those places should consequently be extended.

Brussels should be kept in Flanders' economic and spatial plans.

---

## Footnotes

- 1 The second structure pattern of the Benelux added the idea of a regional development based on a polycentric urban network. Thus, for Belgium, the consolidation of the urban network as a polycentric network.
- 2 The decree that followed established a distribution among the four big Walloon cities (Liège - economy, Namur – policy making, Charleroi – social affairs and housing, Mons - culture) but has nothing to see with the SDER nor with polycentrism. It is the result of a political compromise between the mayors of those days.
- 3 Regarding transport, some cooperation agreements guarantee the partners' information but not yet a concertation and negotiation structure.
- 4 As the Brussels-Lille agreement, which resulted in agreements between university hospitals, etc. There are also very concrete cooperations between the Nord-pas-de-Calais, Flemish and Walloon regions, sometimes much extended (exchange of TV programmes, youth training schemes, exchanges in different economic sectors, etc. Nevertheless, some geographical fantasies have also taken shape (such as the euro-corridors, the Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Anvers-Bruxelles-Charleroi axis) but without results.
- 5 Besides urban and industrial networks (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2003) on a regional scale, in Flanders the 'international network' of the Flemish Diamond (Ghent, Antwerp, Leuven and Brussels) was introduced in physical planning in 1997 (Ministry of the Flemish Community 1997, see also Albrechts et al.. 2003). These regional and international networks function as a theoretical basis for both policy goals (international competition and a complementary network with efficient use of resources).
- 6 Some participants underline that, if there is one geographically very concentrated sector, it is the ICT sector itself (!). They point out the ICTs require, contrary to a widespread idea, a lot of relatively heavy infrastructures (optical fibres and Wifi terminals networks, etc.), which are only available, efficient and profitable in large urban areas and therefore reinforce the concentration process of the activities that use them. This is a bit like the idea according to which, by building a motorway from a prosperous to a poor area, wealth would be brought into the latter, while through lack of voluntarist policies, the opposite is generally true.
- 7 Call centres in the former Eastern countries, keyboarding of postal addresses in Morocco, keyboarding of accounting documents in India, etc.
- 8 Clients are not necessarily 'end users' in this case (even if they can be), as the question was asked in terms of enterprise networks.
- 9 Regarding the links between subcontractors and principals – in car industry, for instance – we notice an emerging trend toward geographical concentration, but those subcontractors make no longer part of the local economy. They belong to big multinationals (constructors are willing to be connected to the same suppliers all over the world) and are just as mobile as their principals (therefore, when an assembler delocalizes, subcontractors delocalize as a consequence). Those subcontracting multinationals give rise, in the manufacturers' proximity, to autonomous reactive (just-in-time) entities that have to meet the principals' orders. They thus do not function much in networks contrary to the constructors who, with some variations according to brands, have an internal organization (engine, bodywork, assembly divisions, etc.) very marked by network functioning.
- 10 "A survey was conducted in 2003 among enterprises in Flanders. The main focus of this survey was to detect the logic behind firms' location decisions and the factors that determine this decision making process. One of the topics that has been investigated is the nature of the networked territory of the firms that are located in Flanders and how this territory is influenced by the

---

industry context and firm size. We also wanted to confront this geography of the firms' territorial strategies with the policy introduced urban networks. To test this, several questions were formulated in the survey about firm size, market range of these companies and the location of the three most important clients and suppliers. The combination of the firm size, the industry, the market range and location of the three most important clients and suppliers give the opportunity to test the conceptual framework. The investigated industries are business services, construction, financial services, manufacturing industry, transport-distribution-logistics (TDL) and wholesale. Investigated firms have at least 5 employees. Applying these criteria to firms in Flanders resulted in a selection of approximately 30000 firms (independent firms as well as affiliates). A survey was sent to 20.000 of them based on a stratified random selection procedure; 5499 of these firms responded."

11 "In the context of existing polycentric urban structures in Europe, the urban network concept is gaining importance in urban, regional and physical planning (...) Urban networks are introduced to surpass the individual capacities of the cities involved. They are introduced by several (regional) governments as a potential answer to the global economic and territorial competition and, as a consequence, they become an essential part of national or regional spatial policy making. These polycentric urban networks are supposed to compete with other and with the bigger monocentric (London, Paris) urban regions. The internal structure of the polycentric urban network is perceived as a complementary urban system; a division of tasks between the members of the urban network and cooperation based on existing intercity relationships or on a deliberate policy of division of resources between the cities concerned. (...) It is beyond doubt that there exist intense relationships between the nodes of the polycentric urban networks. (...) Nevertheless, the question has to be raised whether or not the urban network model also represents a tangible part of the network economy: that is, whether cities that are geographically closely located to each other trigger economic transactions that are observable and measurable? In other words, the question assessed in this article is to what degree urban network models are also a framework for networking between economic agents (firms). Or putting it reversely, what type of urban network, and more in general, what type of geographical constellation results from the network economy. Another, related question is how the urban network model can be a basis for an economic and urban/regional policy. Networking between economic agents is still increasing rapidly. Indeed, to stay competitive, companies had to change their organization and inter-firm relationships to a considerable degree over the last 25 years. New forms of corporate organizations and new cooperative strategies between producers, suppliers and clients have replaced fordist hierarchical structures. In these new industrial relationships flexibility of production and labor become the focal point of attention. In this process towards flexibility internal economies of scale are replaced by a system in which external economies and economies of scope are predominant. This system is characterized by a progressive externalization of the production structure, giving rise to a production chain functioning as a networked enterprise (...) The central question in this paper is how the network enterprise deals with the spatial configuration in order to keep the system economically and geographically running. What is the logic behind this networked territory of firms and to what extend the territory shaped by the network enterprise is properly assessed by the urban network model as described earlier. (...) As the network economy is continuing to develop external economies are taking over internal economies. Consequently, external economies are increasingly determining the entrepreneurial logic. To evaluate the territorial impact of this new logic it is necessary to divide external economies in its two major components, i.e. agglomeration economies and network economies. (...) We also introduced a few dummy variables to capture the impact of the urbanization level of the environment where the respondents are located. The default is large agglomerations (Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels). Medium sized agglomerations and non-urban

---

areas are compared vis-à-vis these large agglomerations. We find evidence for the agglomeration theory: the larger the urbanized region the higher the percentage of sales to customers who are located within the boundary of 15 km. Non-urban areas have local clients in their vicinity. However, the larger agglomerations Antwerp and Ghent have relatively local clients in the rest of Flanders, but are oriented towards Brussels. But we also find that companies in large agglomerations do not have a higher export share than those located in medium sized cities or in non-urban areas. On the contrary, firms in non-urban areas have a weakly significant higher share of exports compared to firms that are located in large cities. (...) For firms located in agglomerations, 26% of the sales (output) and 31% of the purchases (input) are transactions that take place within the same agglomeration. A larger share of their most important suppliers is thus located in the 'local' milieu compared to their clients. Networking with other agglomerations in Flanders counts for 18% of total sales and 15% of all purchases. Networking with Walloon agglomerations is very weak with only 2,6% of total sales and 0,6% of total input. (...) On the contrary, the economic relations with Brussels are strong (11% of the sales and 10% of the purchases). The networking with clients in non-urban Flanders is as strong as the relation with Brussels. Clients and suppliers abroad count for 31% of total sales and 34% of all purchases. These substantial shares indicate that on the whole the international networking is more important than the intra-urban networks and the networks between urban areas in Flanders. These percentages vary widely according to the firms size class and the industry to which respondents belong. (...) The networking of small firms differs from that of larger firms in different ways; the intra-urban sales are larger (33% for small firms compared to 26% for all firms), inter-urban networking is stronger (26% of the sales vs 18% and 33% of the purchases vs. 16%), and the networking abroad is less prominent (17% of the sales vs 31% and 25% of the purchases vs 34%). Business services also have their own way of networking; the intra-urban relationships are relatively strong (40% of sales vs 26% for all firms and 44% of the purchases vs 31% for all firms); the networking with Brussels is strong (14% of sales vs 11% for all firms and 19% of the purchases vs 10% for all firms) (...) it is clear that the networked territory of firms does not coincide with existing territorial administrative structures or a predefined framework like urban networks. The networked territory of firms cannot be explained by urban networks. The networked territory can only be defined in terms of relationships between firms located in territories with dynamic industrial communities, where specific skills are present and competence is historically built up and maintained, and where cities, as contextual place, play an important role (...) However, firms are not networking in predefined urban networks. In fact, it would be a surprising result that in a globalizing economy firms fold back to newly constructed coherent spatial entities such as spatial policy urban networks. Since the firms' competitive position is a result of their integration in international networks it is necessary to tap in different knowledge sources around the world. Consequently, current policy introduced urban networks are not an appropriate framework to understand and influence the network economy. Based on the results of the survey we claim that the policy urban networks should be seen as a part of the broader framework of the networked territory where scale jumping is essential."

12

On the contrary, one interlocutor considered however that a metropolitan polycentric spatial structure in Central Belgium and around Brussels would bring a real solution to congestion and transport problems. It argued that if a range of high density urban poles are found in a given space, distances in private transport should be reduced and the motorways used in a more balanced way than today when every morning and evening one direction is clogged up and the other empty. In addition, it argued that this would increase the profitability of public transport. Buses would always be well loaded with passengers, whereas today they are almost empty when they leave the periphery and arrive completely packed in the city centre and inversely. Similarly, with the aggravating circumstance, in the case of rail transport, that today trains are almost empty during half

---

of the journey (the remaining section after unloading commuters in Brussels for example). Studies are reported to have shown the number of empty seats could drop by 60%. However, it has to be considered that this is a very minoritarian position from a person reflecting a quite anti-urban attitude, and quite reluctant, from a Flemish point of view, towards Brussels' weight in Belgium.

13

One of the participants explained that, after the Walloon political institutions had moved, the first generation of civil servants commuted from Brussels or the Walloon Brabant to Namur. Nowadays, the second generation settles in the green periphery of Namur, which recreates a pendular movement at local level, resulting in morning and evening traffic jams. Therefore, polycentrism should promote a concentrated deconcentration, otherwise we will sink back into more mistakes on other scales.

---

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: List of documents analysed.

- a. ESDP
- b. PRD
- c. SDER
- d. RSV

## Appendix 2: List of participants in the Policy Focus Group meetings (cf. Exel file)

Additional appendices may be added to include background information on the document analysis, focus group agendas and results.

## Appendix 3: Discussion themes for the Policy Focus Group.

1) Presentation of the Polynet project and its main lessons (comment: The scale of analysis considered here is, in accordance with the definition of polycentrism as given in the ESDP, the supraregional scale. This is why we have to take in consideration cooperation and complementarity between the cities of one and the same MCR – an MCR is defined in itself and therefore does not correspond to the boundaries of administrative entities, although this question can be discussed on urban scale too (centre and periphery), especially in the case of Brussels).

2) The concept of polycentrism: As polycentrism is diversely shared and understood (some of the respondents were reserved, others very critical of this concept), not only in terms of meaning but in terms of implications, we had to create a set of questions centred on that notion so as to clearly define our statements:

1. Are you familiar with the concept of polycentrism?
2. What do you mean by polycentrism?
3. Do you know the origin of this notion? Why was it developed? What does it express?
4. Is the concept of polycentrism integrated into the development pattern of your region? Does it structure and guide the policies developed or implemented in the field of territorial planning?
5. Even if polycentrism is not the focus of official spatial policies, is it for you a core concern as regards planning and territorial planning?
6. Is polycentrism bound to become a central question in the future? Will it be integrated as a concept structuring spatial planning policies in your own area?

### 3) Polycentrism and development

1. How can polycentrism influence, positively or negatively, regional economic development and the resolution of the main territorial planning problems:
  - \* in terms of economic growth?

- 
- \* in terms of balanced regional development?
  - \* in terms of relations between residence and employment places?
  - \* in terms of meeting the job market?
  - \* in terms of periurbanisation control (through regrouping within smaller centres)?
  - \* in relieving the big urban centres?
  - \* at the level of transport problems and accessibility to different services?
  - \* in terms of environmental problems?
2. Can regional development on a polycentric model reduce the tensions between economy, social issues, private life and environment?
  3. Do you see any impacts or changes resulting from the development of ICTs in the way companies are organized?
  4. If so, do those changes influence the spatial insertion of companies, their organization or the spatial relations between firms (partners, customers-suppliers, subcontractors) or between the head offices or branches of a firm?
  5. If so, which is the link (or how do you see it) between polycentric regional development and ICTs?
  6. Which are, in your opinion, the following stakeholders' expectations regarding polycentrism? Do they need it? Is there any demand on their side?
    - a. Firms: will there be continuing scale economies through spatial concentration of functions or cooperative network economy within a more and more decentralised and delocalised structure? Do you know the firms' needs regarding their functional intra-firms (between branches) and inter-firms (partners, customers-suppliers, subcontractors, etc.) relationships?
    - b. Policy-makers: which is their reaction toward cooperative functioning? Does each of them always turn situations to his own advantage when setting up enterprises, creating jobs, infrastructures, etc., or are they are ready to consider a distribution and sharing of these elements across the whole territory and to function in a cooperative way?
    - c. Citizens: will polycentrism result in improved quality of life and environment?
    - d. Consumers and customers: do they prefer more concentrated or more scattered selling points and infrastructures?
    - e. Workers: do they prefer concentration or scattering of jobs on the territory (commuting vs. proximity)?

Concrete examples:

Wallonia lacks a strong capital. Consequently, will it come off better through a concentration of its strong points into a single place, through inter-urban cooperation, or specialization in niches? Concretely, should a Walloon enterprise faced with multiple needs for qualified labour force, subcontractors, partners, investments, financial advice, exports, RD, etc. set up in one place where all those know-how and services are available, or should it rather disperse into places in which this know-how is located?

Brussels is already in competition with its periphery as regards the establishment of economic activities => is it going to accept a decongestion of its activities, and which of them?

---

#### 4) Polycentrism and regional policy

1. If ICTs and globalization do have implications on the internal and spatial organization of firms, do you think the regional and political authorities are aware of these questions, and what support and /or regulation measures do they develop?
2. Which recommendations and which policies should be elaborated in order to improve inter-city cooperation and balanced regional economic integration?
3. Which recommendations should be promoted to improve:
  - a. regional economic growth?
  - b. balanced regional development?
  - c. the problematic of relations between residence and employment places?
  - d. matching of the job market?
  - e. decongestion of large urban centres?
  - f. transport problematic and accessibility to different services?
  - g. environmental problems?
  - h. reduction of the tensions between economy, social issues, private life, environment?
  - i. improving the general connectivity of economic actors?
4. Among the present governance structures, which are the deficient tools that should be improved, essentially with a view to promote a polycentric development economy?
5. Can you identify some lacks or requirements that are not being met in your regional governance structures? Do you have the feeling that new structures should be necessary in order to fulfil the need for increased vertical and horizontal cooperation?
6. Could you identify (a) inconsistent, (b) deficient policies and/or conflicts of objectives at regional planning level?
7. In a concrete way, if you consider the future and the development of your region, would you advocate a reinforcement of Brussels at all levels or Brussels' decongestion, a decentralization of Brussels' functions, its insertion into a broader interdependent cooperative network?
8. Given the tense relationships between the Belgian Communities, do you believe that a polycentric development, which presupposes intense inter-urban and inter-regional cooperation, is a realistic aim? And, if so, how can a boundary as vague as an MCR be operational from an administrative point of view?

#### 5) Problematics related to polycentrism

1. What is preferable in your opinion: concentration or scattering of activities:
  - a. In terms of increased costs resulting from scattered infrastructures?
  - b. In terms of increased traffic?
  - c. In terms of increased damage to the environment?

- 
- d. In terms of scattered skills, economic and scientific know-how, labour force, etc.
  - e. etc.
2. Is the answer to these questions likely to vary according to the different points of view: enterprises (scale economy or cooperative network economy), policy-makers (all benefits for myself and Nimby phenomenon for the nuisance), citizens (quality of life and environment), consumers/clients (concentration or scattering of shops), workers (concentration or scattering of jobs, commuting or proximity of jobs), etc.?
  3. Is polycentrism going to bring about a more balanced regional development as postulated in its conception, or rather give impetus to unequal development?

6) Personal opinion of the respondent

1. What do you personally think about this concept, this view of spatial development?
2. Do you agree with the SDEC analysis which praises polycentric urban development in the future?
3. Is polycentrism, according to you, able to solve, partly or totally, some territorial planning problems?
3. Do you think polycentrism can contribute positively to regional economic development?