

Executive Summary

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About the project: partnerships and varying objectives

The BEMINE project has been a notably broad research consortium in the Finnish context. It has consisted of 12 partner organizations of which ten have been research partners – eight research groups from six universities and two from research institutes – and two partners focusing on interaction. Three of the research partners are non-Finnish: two British and one Norwegian. The project has been supported from the start by an active group of stakeholders from different levels of the public sector. In addition, an international reference group has brought critical and constructive observations to support research along the way. We have also sought to develop the “meta level” of our research agenda by engaging in continuous discussion with our key stakeholders through e.g. various “Urban Forum” workshops.

The set of objectives of the project has been wide-ranging. We have examined from different viewpoints the so-called MALPE work of Finnish city regions, with which we mean a loose model of action that steers land use (M), housing (A), transport (L), services (P) and economic development (E) on different levels and sectors of government. We have sought to add information on the interdependencies and new pathways of MALPE work towards more sustainable societal resolutions. In support of this, we set out to produce knowledge of the trends of urbanization, as well as inter-relationships between mobility, migration and urbanization. We understood the importance of generating new models and conceptualizations of phenomena related to urbanity and urbanization dynamics, and, further, new tangible tools to be utilized in planning and decision making in MALPE work and, more broadly, city-regional strategic planning. We were convinced that new insights and concrete policy recommendations are needed to develop governance relations and rationalities, especially in view of the Finnish regional governance reform and the reform of the Land Use and Building Act. Our intention was also to gain insights on how institutional ambiguities ought to be handled and how challenges of political legitimation could be resolved in the governance of MALPE work.

Urbanization trends, relations and sustainability factors

In the recent decades, the population of urbanized areas has grown with a double speed in relation to growth in the whole of Finland. Migration between regions impacts on the development effectively: the growth of the city regions results from low out-migration, rather than high in-migration. In 2017, four out of five urban residents lived in one of the 34 city regions that had the population size of minimum 15 000 in their centres. During the 2000s, approx. 81%, and recently over 90% of new apartments have been located in city regions. The bulk of economic activity is located in core areas of central cities, although their portion of land cover is small, and even the share of population falls under the share of production. There is empirical evidence of the contribution of agglomeration benefits to productivity. This promotes the competitiveness of cities and the whole national economy. The fringe areas of growing cities also benefit, as economic activity spreads out.

In a country with long distances and sparse population, such as Finland, there is necessarily a large share of peripheral areas. Rural areas typically lag behind urban areas in terms of, e.g. unemployment or income measures. With a scenario calculus of regional economy, we anticipate the concentration of workforce to the largest city regions, especially Helsinki

metropolitan region, also in the future. The studies of regional econometrics, however, reveal that urbanization in Finland has not furthered the income and wellbeing differences between regions. Although the regional differences are relatively high, there has been balancing development during this century. Viewed from the perspective of available income, the regional differences are rather moderate. The regional balance is not worsening in urbanizing Finland.

An increasingly common mechanism behind growing urban economy is the phenomenon of jobs following the workforce. Competitiveness calls for excellence, innovations and skills. This development draws especially on skilled people who seek pleasant living environments. In order to thrive, a city region needs to invest on its attractiveness. People prefer high quality living environments, and their preferences drive regional change. The enterprises follow, in order to capture skilled workforce and to provide services for the growing population. The reverse mechanism of traditional industries, that of workforce following jobs, is losing its importance in the creativity-fostering pinnacle of urban economy.

The recent development of urban structure has indicated a change towards sustainability. In this decade, new development has more seldom taken place in car-dependent areas in comparison to previous decades, and, at the same time, the long-standing trend of urban fragmentation has slowed down. The effectiveness of urban areas has been increased by densification.

Increased urban density decreases the need of new infrastructure and promotes the accessibility of services. The urbanity or rurality of the place of residence is often claimed to impact on greenhouse gas emissions of consumption. The average mobility emissions of households are indeed notably higher when their homes are located in urban fringes and rural areas than in urban areas. On the other hand, the carbon footprint of consumed goods and services is larger in urban areas than rural ones. In fact, the difference of aggregated carbon footprint of food, mobility, goods and services consumption is not that clear between urban and rural places of residence.

The achievement of emission reduction targets calls for measures in all segments of production and consumption. The urban structure and development guidelines ought to support sustainable lifestyles and consumption in different areas. Attention should be paid to renovation of existing building stock, building material choices in new development, improving energy efficiency, favourable locations of new development in the urban fabric, development of public transport and functional compactness of urban structure. Especially in the nearby areas of urban centres there is a lot of potential for more sustainable solutions.

It is fair to say, though, that land use is among the most severe functions threatening biodiversity, while urban and urbanization-supported consumption makes climate change mitigation difficult. The functionalist zoning tradition of urban planning and the dominating role of “hard” urban development - i.e. housing and industry development and infrastructure connecting them – in local policy making, continue to hinder the adoption of green infrastructure and ecosystem service concepts. Despite their partially contradictory goals, nature maintenance and urban densification should not be seen as ultimately incompatible. In addition to maintenance of greenery, there are multiple ways of adding nature to even the most dense urban areas, to add livelihood to urban spaces and to provide ecosystem services in detailed planning.

Governance challenges, development pathways and questions of democracy

City regions pose challenges also from the perspective of governance. The MALPE development issues have posed the need to develop new means for organizing city-regional governance. This has meant focusing on regionally and strategically more selective instruments that draw on new types of partnerships. This serves to both strengthen city regions as “joint” regions of governance and affects the nature of city-regional collaboration at the practice level.

The city-regional MALPE work is challenged, on the one hand, by difficulties in transcending sectoral boundaries, and on the other hand, by difficulties in transcending municipal boundaries – at both the level of municipal management in strategic key issues and at the operational level in, for example, inter-municipal land use planning issues. The city regions differ, however, as regards to their opportunities for and experiences of coordinative work, concerning different areas and issues. Hence, the MALPE realities are multiple, and the city region appears more consolidated in one case than in another.

Sustainable governance of urbanization requires a rounded understanding of how different city regions are able to utilize the available tools and what kind of tools are needed for managing future development. With the increase of stakeholders and their interests, the need for trans-sectoral coordination increases, too. Boundary work is a means to promote issue-based coordination, instead of fostering silos. It has the potential of supporting purposive collaboration among the stakeholders, including the citizens.

In boundary work, boundary objects are needed: shared tools and objects of planning and governance. Boundary objects are often based on new conceptualizations of planning objects that cut through sectoral boundaries, such as the concepts of ‘urban fabric’ and ‘ecosystem service’, studied in the project. The first brings together especially land use and transport planning, while the second combines ecological and economic thought. Such concepts have also provided the groundwork for new boundary object tools, including different models, methods and indicators. The BEMINE project has developed especially a method of GIS-based identification of different urban fabrics, integrating not only the perspectives of land use and transport planning, but area service planning, too.

In the context of strategic city-regional planning, the boundary work and development of boundary objects must be seen as part of broader iterative process of synergistic planning. In this process, the identification of baselines of contemporary development trends is correlated with the identification of driving forces of future scenarios, both laying ground for the deliberation on the vision to be set for future city-regional development. The vision, in turn, provides the basis for strategic planning for the stepwise attainment of the vision, and further identification of indicators in monitoring the implementation of the strategy. These principles characterize ‘wise’ city-regional strategic planning, beyond ‘smart’.

Large strategic projects, such as light rail and bus rapid transit projects, may also serve as boundary objects between different actors. These large infrastructure projects shift the focus of city-regional development to longer term futures, necessitating anticipatory agreement between the municipalities of shared principles of developing the urban structure and networks in the city region. An integrated view to planning is needed, instead of viewing city-regional development in terms of “folders” of disconnected projects. This entails new planning tools that enable the decision makers to better recognize the magnitude and time span involved when committing to projects.

Indeed, the work on transcending sectoral and municipal boundaries in decision making must continue. The commitment of managers involved in city-regional organs is not enough.

Collaboration requires trust, institutional structures to support it, and the efforts by the administrative and political leadership of municipalities in opening the city-regional scale for joint planning. A basic requirement is data production at the city-regional level, and thereby the construction of city-regional development schemes and understanding. This, however, is hindered by the lack of shared practices and the incompatibility of local data systems. The established collaboration in MAL themes has served in lowering the thresholds of information sharing, especially in the four largest city regions having been engaged in MAL agreement procedures. The integration of PE themes to the MAL(PE) entity still remains a challenge, though.

While MALPE-planning and -development are not closed processes as such, in practice they often comprise only a handful of expert actors who are well-informed in the practices and the knowledge base of regional planning. This scarcity of actors, when combined with the exclusivity of the knowledge practices, may mean that the knowledge base of strategic city-regional planning is severely diminished. Hence, e.g. the knowledges of the citizens living in the region might not be utilized.

The lives of the citizens are also attached to multiple places, in and out of the region. Both private and public employers have taken notice of the fact that this ‘multi-locality’ affects the built environment and requires multi-functional places. Planners are yet to fully comprehend the complexities of multi-locality, though. Multi-local dwelling and working do not mean rootlessness in the traditional sense. Instead, one can conceptualize this as having “aerial roots” that are carried along in multi-local life situations.

In strategic city-regional planning, citizens’ participation must thus be understood in a different vein than in relation to statutory practices, e.g. of land use planning. Regional or inter-regional citizenship does not pivot around the role of a dweller in a municipality, nor does it rely on the motivation of participation as related to the place of residence. ‘Regional citizenship’ is constructed in the lived reality of the region, e.g. through work, education, residence, use of services and recreation. It is realized as customer experiences of regional public transport, activity in collaboratively arranged cultural events, or regional fulfillment of service needs for different age groups.

The aspect of lived citizenship reveals that people may be politically active in many ways, also in the context of city-regions where different citizen roles are often mixed. This practical understanding and activity emanating from the everyday life should be recognized as the focal points of regional citizenship. There is thus a distinct need to develop practices of issue-based participation within city-regional planning.

Finally

The most important message of the BEMINE project concerns the need for strengthening and ensuring knowledge-based and collaborative city-regional development. The city-region is necessarily a collaborative structure that is never ‘finalized’, yet even temporary resolutions require abilities to tolerate both uncertainty and differences. The city-region is not built in a flash. The governance of city-regional uncertainties needs visionary, continuous and synergizing strategy work, one in which short-term coordinative resolutions and operational contracts are based on long-term sustainability visions that proactively anticipates the possible development paths arising from futures scanning of possible trends and creative scenario work.