

Sustainable Planning in a Growing Region: Approaches and Opportunities in Metropolitan Stockholm

*Peter Schmitt, Asli Tepecik Dis, Ryan Weber, Lisbeth Greve Harbo, Mitchell Reardon, Patrick Galera Lindblom
(all at Nordregio, the Nordic Centre for Spatial Development, Stockholm)*

For more than a decade, the Stockholm metropolitan area has seen considerable economic and demographic growth. According to the latest studies this trend will continue, with more than 30,000 new inhabitants forecasted annually until 2030. In particular, central Stockholm County, made up of the municipality of Stockholm and a growing number of sub-urban municipalities, defined here as the metropolitan area of Stockholm, will be most affected. This growth paradigm will influence current and future demand for housing, jobs, resources and any kinds of (public) services. In regards to sustainable spatial planning the crucial question that shall be investigated in our paper is if and to what extent the metropolitan planning community in Stockholm is prepared to respond to this growth. More concretely, we want to explore what kinds of futures they envision; their major normative concepts, tools and instruments, and finally, their adaptive capacity in these respects? In doing so, we have used two different approaches that are closely linked to coping with the expected growth in a sustainable manner.

For the very first time the normative concept of polycentricity was explicitly introduced in the regional development plan in 2001 (RUFSS 2001). It was pursued and further developed in the RUFSS 2010 with the aim of developing eight so-called regional urban cores that are between 15-40 kilometers from the inner city. The main rationale behind this normative concept is to release some of the enduring development pressure from the central core (Stockholm) by (re-)locating such growth potentials in emerging multi-functional regional urban cores, which will be characterized by competitive and accessible economic milieus, compact and energy efficient settlement structures that are linked to public transport, and finally, by an urban landscape that consists of many dense, attractive and diverse urban settings. A more polycentric structure is expected to help combat ongoing urban sprawl through more concentrated urban land management and to channel and reduce the otherwise dispersed intra-regional transport flows. The regional urban cores shall also contribute to a more diverse and robust economic structure in proximity to the inner city.

The concept of polycentricity as promoted in the RUFSS 2010 has constituted the ground for developing two urban scenarios for the year 2050 which review the expected growth of people and jobs and their consequences for the existing urban structure in terms of density, mixed use, access to public transport and thermal improvement of the built environment. A so-called base scenario considers the main proposals in the RUFSS 2010 in respect to the future potentials for urban densification in the Stockholm metropolitan area and the main projected public transport measures. The second more radical scenario considers a - in a sustainable perspective - more visionary future urban structure that integrates an even more dense and compact urban structure and a considerable upgrade of the public transport system. The two scenarios have been helpful as a quantitative analysis to assess the potentials as regards future land use and the further extension/concentration of the urban fabric.

They have been also used for investigating the planning context through interactive workshops by promoting a dialogue among planning officials in the Stockholm metropolitan area regarding the level of consistency with the objectives of current policies and what they (can) imply for current and future urban policies. In addition – through textual analysis and face-to-face interviews we have shed light on the current practices, learning processes and difficulties (so far) in applying this polycentric strategy in the Stockholm metropolitan area within the existing governance regime.

In the proposed paper¹ we will reflect and bring together our empirical findings by assessing the available adaptive capacity within the Stockholm planning community to respond to the current and future growth paradigm.

¹ The paper is based on two international research projects 1) Super-Cities: Sustainable Land Use Policies for Resilient Cities (funded by the URBAN-Net programme - Supporting urban sustainability research in Europe) and 2) SUME: Sustainable Urban Metabolism for Europe (EU FP 7 Collaborative project, 6.2.1.5 Urban development ENV.2007.2.1.5.1).