

Future Orientations for Cities – “FOCI”

The FOCI project aims to analyse the functions, trends and opportunities of European cities in relation to competitiveness, social cohesion and environment. It will explore the relation between cities and their hinterlands, and existing and potential inter-city “polycentric” co-operation for competitiveness and service delivery. Scenarios of possible future development paths for cities are also promised.

The research team envisages drawing substantially on the Urban Audit. However, other cities will be added if they have a population of at least 50,000 and are at least 150km distant from a city in the Urban Audit. None of these are in the UK.

There is to be a literature review that will look at the notion of city competitiveness and also at the role of cities within global and European economic networks. The ideas that will be explored are of cities in the spatial division of labour and in the hierarchy of power – i.e. cities as controllers of – and controlled by – other cities. A database will review a sample of 1,572 firms out of 4,000 leading global companies to explore these patterns.

The literature on driving forces for social cohesion will also be reviewed. The researchers suggest that they will look not only at social indicators at the urban scale, but also at internal inequalities between districts and amongst social groups. Their main objective is to test the hypothesis that new forms of growth in the globalized and knowledge-based economy mean that social cohesion becomes increasingly uncoupled from economic performance, and indeed that economic growth widens social inequalities.

The environmental policy review will take in issues of urban sprawl, impacts of economic change, and sustainability indicators, amongst other factors. Use will be made of Corine land cover data. Compact cities will be identified by a combination of population density and land cover trends over 10 years.

Analysis of accessibility is also built into the project. This will take in recent transport trends such as budget airlines and high-speed rail and air combinations.

Analysis of cities and their hinterlands will concentrate on the largest cities, because of the key position in the global information economy. Thus there will be a particular focus on changing relations between the metropolis and its surrounding macro-region. The core hypothesis is that the ties between the metropolis and its hinterland are weakening. However, the team also recognise that the regional context strongly influences city-region relations. Therefore they plan at least five case studies. These will also allow collection of additional data down to NUTS 5 level.

The Inception Report recognises that “Although polycentricity has been agreed upon as a major policy goal within European territorial policies, we still lack sufficient evidence about the actual ‘reality’ of polycentricity.” Thus a basic aim of the research is to examine this “reality”, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. This will entail building matrices to show and compare connections, and also the use of case studies.

Scenarios and policy options are promised.