

Emerging spatialities and EU policy instruments: cases and perspectives

EU urban strategies 2014-2020: exploring the functional area approach

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Abstract: There is a vast literature that has investigated processes of spatial reconfiguration, contributing to the emerging of a "new urban question" that not only reframes traditional urban issues but also challenges our understanding of what are cities today. At the same time, the "European city model" still persists, particularly regarding the institutional role of cities, increasingly considered as relevant policy actors. This "urban paradox" gives new emphasis on the urban regional scale and urgently calls for connecting the two dimensions, both in terms of dynamics on the ground and policy formulation. The paper addresses the topic by focusing on the functional area approach promoted by the EU Regional Policy discourse discussing how it shapes and legitimates new spatial configurations, with implications for urban analysis and policy approaches. The paper is based on the analysis of a database gathering nearly 1000 strategies for Sustainable Urban Development funded by EU in 2014-2020, with a significant number of functional areas. Interestingly, functional areas as a strategic approach do not only apply to metropolitan areas, big cities and FUAs. On the contrary, it has been used for different type of territories, beyond metropolitan areas, and suggests the need for better understanding what kind of spatialities and territorial arrangements they contribute to shape.

Keywords: EU urban policy; sustainable urban development; functional urban areas; strategic planning

Narratives on emerging spatial forms¹

There is a vast literature that has investigated processes of spatial reconfiguration of urban areas in the past 30 years (Soureli and Youn, 2009, Brenner, 2014). Once that the nineteenth century model of city as described by the Chicago School has clearly become outdated, literature has been engaged in finding new narratives and terms able to describe the new spatial forms urbanization was assuming. However, according to Soja (2011) a sort of inertia has prevented contemporary urban scholars from going beyond a traditional division between (dense) urban and (low-density) suburban, and such dualistic model has been reiterated by the majority of them.

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On the contrary, what characterises the contemporary urban form is an erosion of the boundary between urban and suburban, with a convergence in the density levels, and the upsurge of an "expansive, polynucleated, densely networked, information-intensive, and increasingly globalized city region" (Soja, 2011, p.7). In such new urban form, it is not possible to distinguish between a centre and a periphery, and on the contrary it is found a "polycentric network of urban agglomerations where relatively high densities are found throughout the urbanized region" (*ibidem*). Even if in the words of Soja it is impossible to generalise, still there are some elements that characterizes regional urbanization:

- Processes of decentralization and recentralization, leading to the emergence of new unstable "inner cities", with new concentration of immigrants which lead to an unprecedented cultural and economic heterogeneity of the population, and growing conflict between domestic and immigrant populations.
- Increasingly dense and demographically as well as economically differentiated suburbs, characterised by new and heterogeneous way of life, more like what the urban used to be. Expulsion of some urban functions in peri-urban context capable of generating new centres.

City-regionalism can be seen as a powerful narrative which spans beyond spatial disciplines as planning or urban studies. The narrative has in fact lead to a spatial turns in economics. According to Soja (2017, p.198) if regions were seen in the past as purely "places where things happens" now they are seen as "powerful driving forces in themselves energizing regional worlds of production, consumption and creativity, while at the same time shaping the globalization of capital, labor and culture".

However, Morgan (2015) warns on the risks of adopting a narrow frame of this narrative, and seeing city-regions purely as vehicles for economic growth. On the contrary a broader perspective on regional urbanization can lead to address city-regions as strategic planning spaces to address sustainable urban development.

Along this line, Soja (2017) recommends on the one side to adopt a critical interpretation on the generative force of regional development. On the other side to recognize the negative effects of regional urbanisation, which implies higher densities and in turn means more strain on public services, worsening of environmental and health conditions, increasing social polarisation and spatial inequalities. What is important to stress, it that all those externalities together cannot be seen nor responded to as a simple extension of the metropolitan model, but must be reframed as a new urban question.

Secchi (2010; 2012) talks also about the new urban question, underling how historically, to a radical change in the structure of economy and society has also corresponded the emergence of an urban question. The present urban question can be defined on the basis of growing urbanization and spatial redistribution of the world's population, and it entails issues of climate change, right to mobility and increasing economic, cultural and spatial polarization. In relation to all these aspects, Secchi underlines the role of space and of spatial relations, and it concludes affirming how spatial capital should be intended as a central independent category for social and economic institutional organization.

Building on the tradition of Italian territorial political economy, Le Galès (2018) argues that contemporary urbanisation process can be explained only in relation to social and political transformation. According to him, it is true that we are witnessing some dramatic changes in the nature of cities but is not possible to generalize trends at global level, neither to identify as unique factor at stake macro-economic forces. In particular, for what concerns European cities, the traditional urban system has been proven stable over time, with some internal differentiations (p.232):

- A certain number of metro regions on the periphery of Europe (southern Europe, Northern England, Eastern Europe) are facing acute difficulties.
- Middle-sized middle-income metro regions are also struggling.
- High-income metro-regions are becoming more distinctive.

In Le Galès view, even if under threat, metro-regions are in a favourable position in respect to states, considering that through urban policy they can foster national economic growth, tackle social problems, face issues of sustainable development or climate change. In the 90's, political dimension was central to the flourishing of European middle-sized metropolises. Strategic projects and planning strategies were collective projects where urban elites sustained the representation of cities as a whole. The point is then to assess the capacity to govern of today's urbanised regions.

Impacts on the statistic definition of a city

As a consequence to the upsurge of new urban forms, the need of finding new statistical definition of what can be considered a city, as well as new ways of classifying urban areas emerged. In the EU, Eurostat launched a legislative initiative called 'Tercet' aimed at integrating the classification of territorial units for statistics based on population thresholds known as NUTS (Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003) with a classification based on territorial typologies which better qualitative defines the nature of territorial areas. In particular, at local level the definition of city (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2012) is based on the method developed by EC and OECD called Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA). This method is computed using maps of built-up area and population density obtained from satellite images and national censuses. Moreover, it has been adopted the typology of Functional Urban Area (FUA) which identifies densely populated urban areas (cities) and adjacent municipalities with high levels (at least 15% of the employed population) of commuting towards the densely populated centres (commuting zones) (figure 1). At regional level, the typology of metropolitan region is introduced, which refers to one or an aggregation of (NUTS 3) region(s) in which at least 50% of the population live in Functional Urban Areas of at least 250.000 inhabitants.

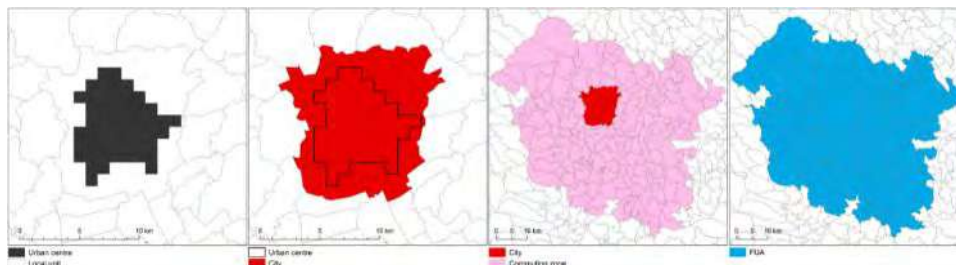


Figure 1 From left to right: Urban centre, city, commuting zone and functional urban area. Source: REGIO GIS

If NUTS classification mirrors largely the administrative structure of the Member States, the territorial typologies introduced with Tercet regulation are on the contrary purely based on density and on a functional understanding of cities, allowing for individuating urban areas across administrative boundaries.

The importance of Functional Urban Areas can be illustrated by the size of the “spatial mismatch”: substantially a larger number of people live in the functional urban areas of European cities than in the core city (European Commission and UN-HABITAT, 2016, Lavalle *et al.* 2017). In the case of Milan, if the urban centre that corresponds to the municipality of Milan counts with 1,242,123 inhabitants (2011 national census), the City has 3,139,394 inhabitants, and the FUA counts with 4,138,424 inhabitants. That means that the population living

outside the municipal boundaries but gravitating around the Milan FUA is 133% larger than the one living in the core urban area.

In the case of many urban areas across the EU sustainable urban development would need to be coordinated across the whole functional urban area, although, in many cases cooperation between municipalities is weak or not existing at all. This is why the concept of Functional Urban Area beyond its statistical significance started entering the policy discourse in the EU.

New spatialities in the EU urban discourse

Traditionally two separate discourses have been developed within the EU policy frameworks and regulations (Atkinson, 2001). On the one side the *urban policy discourse* which since the early Urban Communications of the '90s has been focused on reversing the internal decay of cities, and in particular on the issue of deprived neighbourhoods. On the other side, *the spatial or territorial policy discourse* which during the same years was carried on by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) which has its roots in traditional regional development policy and pushed for the achievement of a balanced and polycentric development of European urban areas within a framework of competition and cooperation (Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning, 1999).

The urban discourse was more centred on social cohesion and had as main operational counterparts area-based initiatives (e.g. URBAN Community Initiative) intended as integrated response to the decline of districts within cities. This kind of approach, that is to say integrated, holistic, participated has characterised what has been defined as the EU approach to urban policy, in other words the "Acquis Urbain" (European Commission, 2009). The ESDP on the other side assigned priority to market processes and set the bases for a spatial agenda. Its basic goals were: economic and social cohesion, sustainable development and balanced competitiveness of the European territory (Atkinson, 2001). The ESDP also triggered the first reflections about the relationship between urban and rural areas.

In the first decade of the 2000s these two separate discourses started to converge. In particular, in 2007 the informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion was held in Leipzig, Germany. During the meeting two important documents were approved: the Leipzig Charter, setting common principles and strategies for urban development policy throughout the EU (Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Urban Policy, 2007); and the Territorial Agenda, aimed at providing strategic orientations for a polycentric and balanced territorial development in the EU (Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion, 2007). According to González Medina and Fedeli (2015) the joint launch of the two agendas proved a growing link between the urban and the territorial dimension of EU policies in the framework of the Cohesion Policy. It is in fact in the same years that the EU supported urban actions were mainstreamed in the EU regional policy, in the sense that they stopped being separate Community Initiatives, and started to be part of the Operational Programmes funded through the European Investment and Structural Funds (ESIF). Moreover in 2012, DG REGIO changed his name and became explicitly the Directorate General of the European Commission both for Regional and Urban Policy. This happened in line with the Toledo Declaration of 2010 (Informal Meeting of Ministers of Housing and Urban Development, 2010) which stated that urban development should be integral part of the concept of territorial cohesion (González Medina and Fedeli, 2015).

The converging of the two perspectives influenced the way in which the urban dimension of the EU policy has been conceived, and a growing attention was put to the spatial and territorial development of EU cities and city-regions. The EU urban discourse shifted from being solely linked with the regeneration of neighbourhoods, to

embrace more broadly the objective of *sustainable urban development*; deprived neighbourhoods were inserted into wider territorial frameworks and strategies encouraged crossing administrative boundaries.

The discourse on functional areas has started permeating programmatic documents. The Territorial agenda 2020 (Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning and Territorial Development, 2011, p.6) states that "the cooperation and networking of cities could contribute to smart development of city regions at varying scales in the long run. *Cities should, where appropriate look beyond their administrative borders and focus on functional regions, including their peri-urban neighbourhoods*". At the same time, the Urban Agenda for the EU (Informal Meeting of EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 2016, p. 4): "acknowledges the polycentric structure of Europe and the diversity (social, economic, territorial, cultural and historical) of Urban Areas across the EU. Furthermore, the Urban Agenda for the EU acknowledges the importance of Urban Areas of all sizes and contexts in the further development of the European Union. *A growing number of urban challenges are of a local nature, but require a wider territorial solution (including urban-rural linkages) and cooperation within functional urban areas*. At the same time, urban solutions have the potential to lead to wider territorial benefits. *Urban Authorities therefore need to cooperate within their functional areas and with their surrounding regions, connecting and reinforcing territorial and urban policies*".

Themes with spatial connotation, that were previously discussed strictly in the territorial discourse, entered also the urban one, implying an acknowledgement of the emergence of new spatialities in the EU, of the erosion of the boundaries between urban and rural, of the upsurge of urban areas across administrative boundaries and defined by density and functional relations.

From the operational viewpoint, this turn has been reflected in the 2014-2020 framework for urban policy. During this programming period, mainstreaming was further consolidated and the investment in urban areas through integrated strategies of Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) becomes compulsory (5% of ERDF earmarked for SUD in each Member State). Moreover, special emphasis has been put on the importance of urban-rural linkages and on the functional area approach and new tools has been promoted such as the integrated territorial investment (ITI) to implement strategies on the level of functional urban areas.

This correspondence between political orientation and policy praxis makes even stronger the stress on the functional urban area concept, which is not seen only as a spatial category, but becomes also a strategic one. In 2014-2020 framework in fact, urban areas targeted by SUD are not defined by administrative boundaries, but are defined by strategies themselves (Balducci, 2014). Paraphrasing Morgan (2015) the EU emphasis on functional urban areas seems to legitimate these new spatial configurations as strategic planning spaces to address sustainable urban development.

How this new opportunity has been received by Member States remains to be investigated. In particular, the analysis of SUD strategies addressing functional areas will help to disentangle the implications of this approach in terms of policymaking.

Analysis of SUD strategies addressing functional areas in 2014-2020

In the following three paragraphs an analysis of the Sustainable Urban Development strategies addressing functional areas during the 2014-2020 programming period is discussed. The analysis is the outcome of an ongoing research project called URBADEV "Support knowledge management of EU measures in Integrated Urban and Territorial development" run by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission and entrusted by DG REGIO. The project has two main outputs:

- The creation of knowledge base on urban and territorial strategies supported by EU provisions called STRAT-Board.
- The drafting of a Handbook on Sustainable Urban Development strategies.

STRAT-Board is also an online webtool available at <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/strat-board/>. It visualises almost 1,000 urban and territorial strategies currently implemented across Europe. The strategies can be explored at different geographical levels: European, national and regional. Different aspects of the strategies are presented, such as territorial focus, size of population targeted, thematic focus, funding arrangements, governance structure and implementation mechanism. Data used for STRAT-Board were partially derived by a previous study (EPRC, 2017), and mainly based on a survey addressing Managing Authorities across the 28 Member States, run between February and December 2018.

In addition, the Handbook on Sustainable Urban Development strategies, currently under drafting, is largely based on a mixed methodology which entails a quantitative analysis of STRAT-board data, literature review and a selected number of case studies analysed in respect to methodological challenges tackled during the implementation of strategies.

First of all, the STRAT-Board database provides an overview of the territorial focus of 849 Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) strategies that have been funded by the 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy programming period.

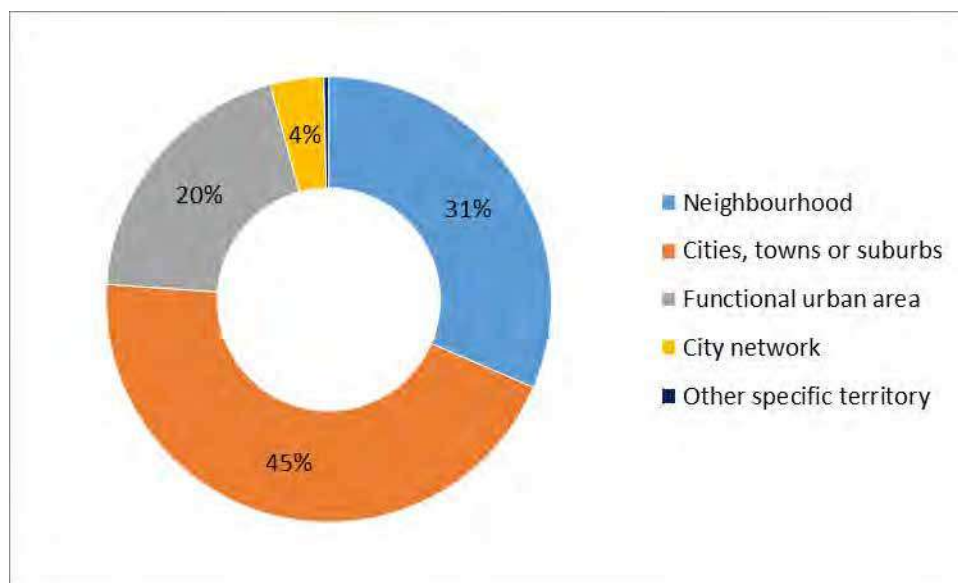


Figure 2 Distribution of strategies per territorial focus (n = 849)

Figure 1 show that the majority of SUD strategies focus on cities (45%), followed by neighbourhoods (31%), functional urban areas or metropolitan areas (20%), a network of cities (4%), and a portion of territory with specific features such as a park, an archaeological zone, or an island (0.4%). In other words even if traditional target areas for EU SUD persist (cities and neighbourhoods), at the same times a growing attention to new spatialities across administrative boundaries can be witnessed, implying the emergence of a functional area approach. Put differently, the functional area approach identifies a space – usually different from administrative boundaries - in which a specific territorial interdependence (or function) occurs, and may need to be governed jointly. Adopting this broad definition of functional area, the joint consideration of the latter three categories of territorial focus², even if smaller in respect to the other two, becomes to be relevant.

² For most analyses that follow, the three latter categories of territorial focus are merged into one called "functional area (multiple municipalities)".

When looking at the territorial focus per Member State (see figure 3), it shows that the functional area approach can be found throughout all macro-regions, with the exception of a few countries. However some differentiations emerge when looking into more details. In some countries like the Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Poland and Slovakia strategies focus exclusively on functional urban areas. In other countries like Austria, Belgium, Greece, France, Italy, Sweden and UK, the focus on functional urban areas is relevant but not exclusive, and coexists with other territorial focuses.



Figure 3 Map of SUD strategies in Europe per territorial focus.

The importance of the functional area approach becomes evident when looking at funding. Overall, the largest share of ESIF funding is invested into functional urban areas, which absorb 51.1% of the total funding (corresponding to 8.3 billion EUR). Cities are the second category absorbing 35.2% of ESIF investment (5.6 billion EUR), while neighbourhoods receive 13.3% of it (2.1 billion EUR).

As figure 4 shows, the majority of the investment in functional areas is in less developed regions, where the share of EU funding is highest (70%). This is interesting because it shows that this "new" type of territorial focus -although applied to a lower number of strategies- is the one receiving most ESIF investment.

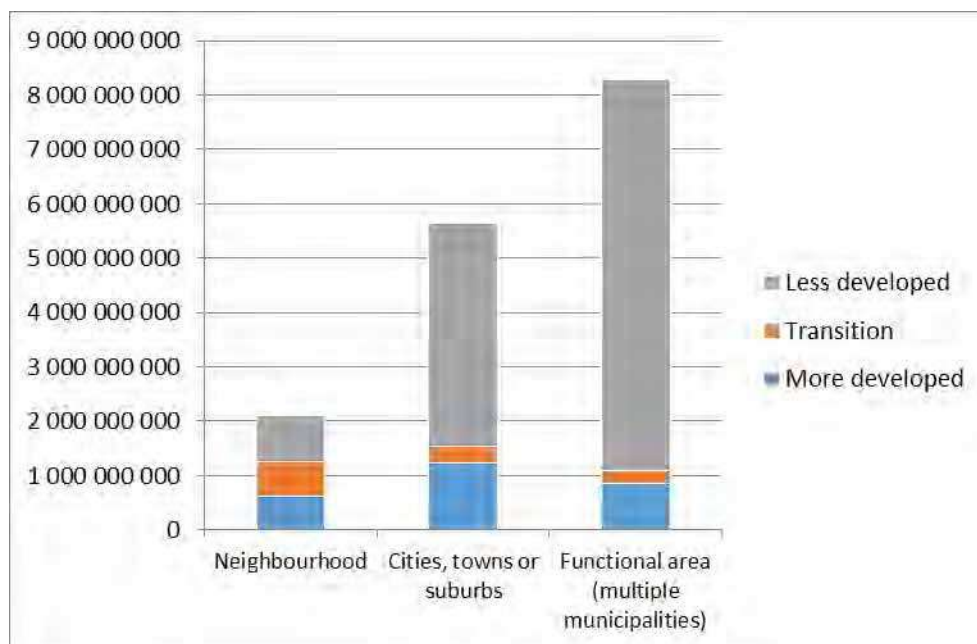


Figure 4 Distribution of ESIF funding per territorial focus and type of region

In fact, strategies with the largest ESIF budgets (more than 100 million EUR) targeting functional areas are exclusively located in less developed regions of EU13 countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Croatia). On the other side, in EU15 countries there are a quite relevant number of strategies addressing functional areas with small ESIF budgets, probably mirroring the size of the population targeted (figure 5). For example in France, 50% of the strategies with a ESIF budget of less than 5 Million EUR address a functional area, while in Italy this is 33%. In fact, in France and Italy, many strategies are targeting functional territories formed by conurbations or networks of small towns with a population of few thousand of inhabitants. In those cases, the functional link is often thematic, such as a common touristic strategy. By pooling resources and establishing inter-municipal cooperation these small towns are able to form a critical mass. This sheds light on the nature of "functional area" category used for SUD policy, and makes clear that the functional area approach can be used for different type of territories, beyond metropolitan areas.

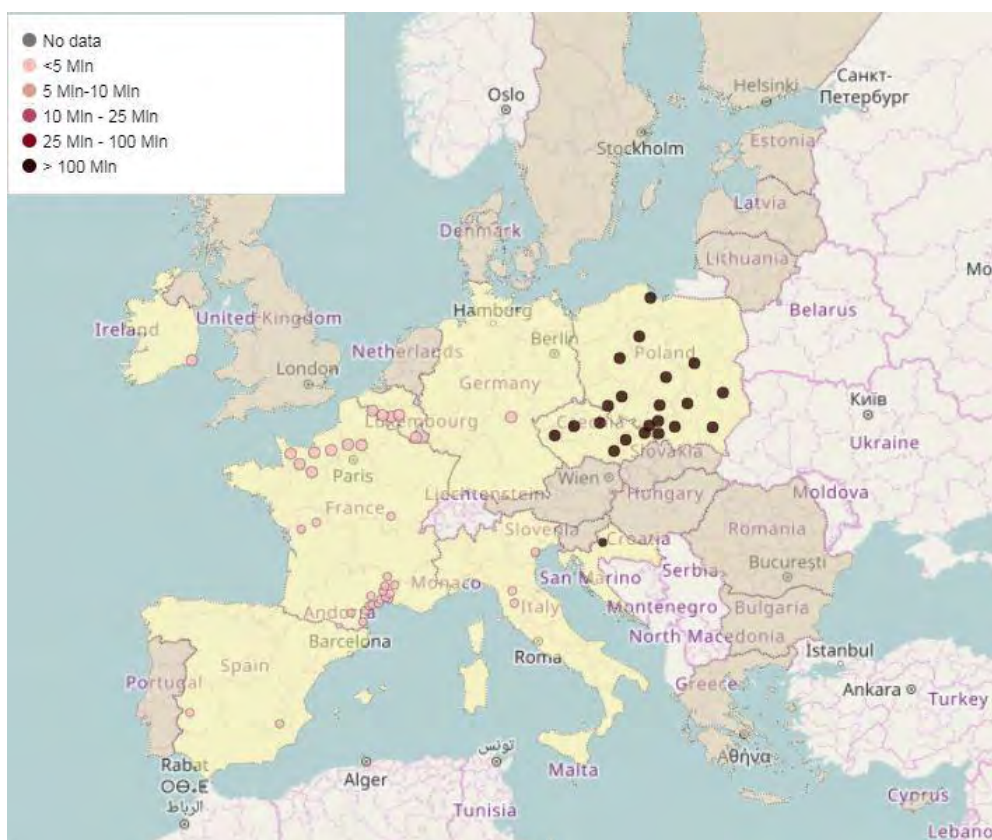


Figure 5 Map of strategies targeting functional urban areas with largest and smallest ESIF contribution

Passing then to analyse the thematic focus of strategies, it is possible to look at the thematic objectives (TO)³ more frequently addressed through the functional area approach. Data shows that strategies targeting functional urban areas address more TO4, that is to say "supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors" while strategies targeting neighbourhoods address largely TO9 "Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination" (respectively 209 and 217 out of 266). Moreover, a focus on transport (TO7) is almost exclusively addressed in functional urban areas.

These thematic priorities are confirmed when looking at key words characterising strategies. In particular the first two key words for functional urban areas are "mobility" (76% of the sample) and "energy" (52%). Quite interestingly even if "spatial planning" is not highly selected, there are other key words concerning spatial issues which are often recurrent, as for example public spaces (43%) and abandoned spaces (39%). Social issues (social inclusion, housing, disadvantaged neighbourhoods) are still important for functional areas but less than

³ In the 2014-2020 programming period, the European Structural and Investment Funds, in particular the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Cohesion Fund, will support 11 investment priorities, also known as thematic objectives. At the same time, the first four objectives constitute key priorities for the ERDF, and a significant part of the investment will focus on these areas (between 50% and 80%, depending on the region's level of development). More information can be found [here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303&from=EN)

in the overall sample of strategies, while "entrepreneurship" and "jobs and skills" are both especially addressed in functional urban areas.

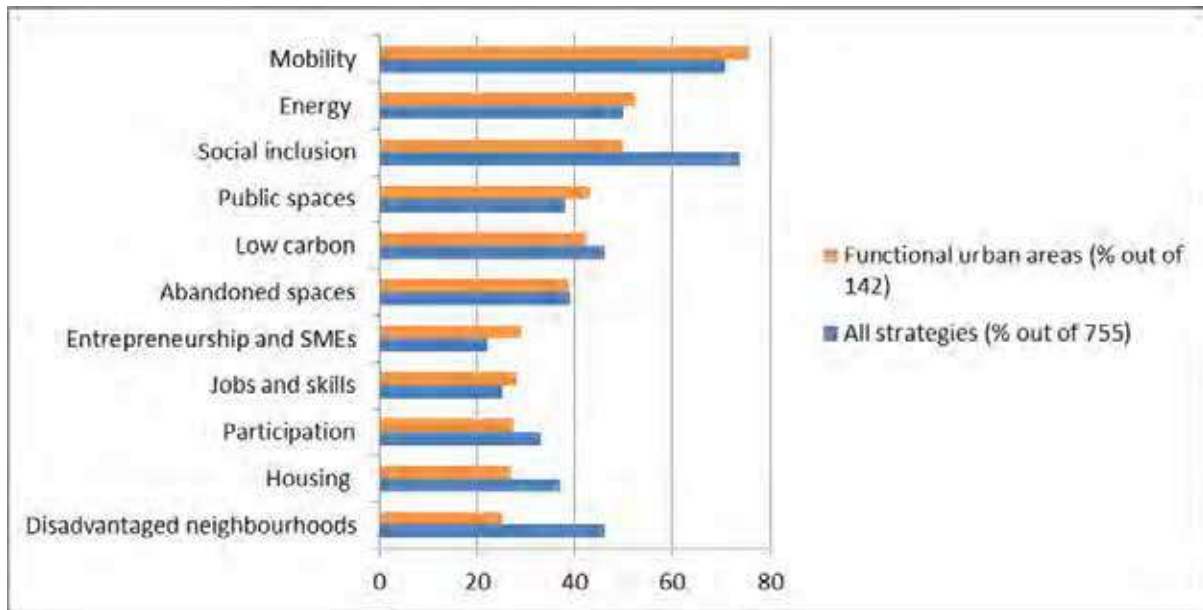


Figure 6 First 11 key words for functional urban areas, with percentage of use for functional urban areas strategies, and for all strategies.

On the other side, it surprises that the key word "urban-rural linkages" has been selected only in the 8% of cases while it would be ideally linked with wider territorial scopes. It is also true that, although supported by EU policy orientations and regulations, it remains a theme difficult to be addressed by urban strategies. Moreover, two important key words characterising the new urban question as emerges in the literature as well as in EU policy documents, that is to say "climate adaptation" and "migration", are hardly ever found across functional urban areas strategies (resp. in the 11% and 0% of cases).

Concluding it seems that the functional area approach is currently used to face more traditional physical or infrastructural issues as well as economic/job related issues. Social themes traditionally associated with core cities/districts, such as social inclusion, housing or deprived neighbourhood are entering also the discourse of functional urban areas to greater or lesser extent. On the other side, most up-to-date themes, which probably require also more innovative solutions, struggle to enter the mainstreamed policy-making.

Challenges in the implementation of the functional area approach

Considering the relative novelty of the functional area approach, it is no surprise that putting it into place can be challenging for bodies designing and implementing SUD strategies. A review of main existing studies (e.g. EPRC, 2017) and resources on current SUD development allows highlighting some of the major challenges of the functional area approach in SUD.

The first challenge when designing a strategy concerns the fact that in many cases the perimeter of the functional area is not given in advance but it is established specifically for the development of the SUD strategy. The establishment of the perimeter should be based on data evidence, but it depends not only on the territorial characteristics of the area, but also on the objective of the strategy, as well as on the relationships among the local actors.

This is why the perimeter of the strategic functional areas in SUD seldom corresponds to the one of the statistical FUAs as defined by OECD/EC methodology. This becomes evident through spatial analysis. When superposing the two type of areas, it emerges that only in half of the cases there is a significant overlap between the two (meaning that more of the 66% of the strategic functional area overlap with the statistical FUA). Almost never the perimeter coincides perfectly, but in the majority of cases (for example in France, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic) the strategic area is smaller than the statistical one. Only in a few cases (in Croatia, Belgium and England) the strategic area is larger than the statistical. Moreover there are many cases (for example in Greece, Spain, Austria and France) where the strategic functional areas do not correspond at all with the statistical FUAs.

Functional areas in SUD can be defined through criteria that are decided at national, regional or local level. Arguably, to ensure optimal strategic planning, when the perimeter is defined at national or regional level (in compliance or not with existing framework) some adaptability is required, to allow better adjusting to local realities.

An example comes from Poland where the territorial scope of SUD strategies is defined on the basis of national guidelines that set socio-economic criteria to delimit urban functional areas around regional capital cities. However, there is some flexibility as the Lublin SUD strategy follows the same criteria but they were revised locally to include other municipalities on the basis of important functional links with the regional capital. Another example is that of the Italian Region of Veneto where the regional Managing Authority has defined five eligible FUAs following an adapted version of the OECD/EC methodology, but then the specific target area for the SUD strategies has been defined at local level with more flexibility⁴.

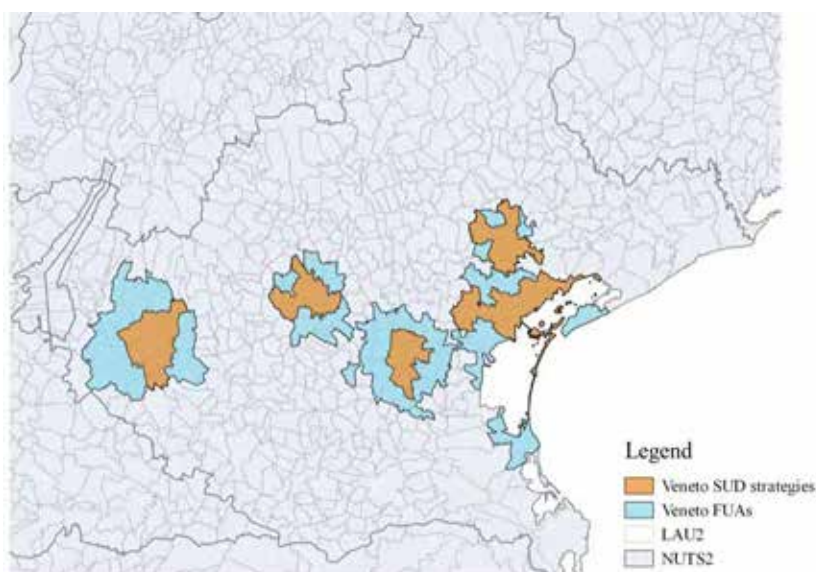


Figure 7 Areas targeted by five strategies in Veneto compared to the FUAs

Key to a successful delineation of boundaries is to have access to data that allows for determining the appropriate indicators and criteria on the basis of which the area will be defined. Especially when the functional area is explicitly or uniquely defined by the strategy, it is difficult to retrieve comparable and homogeneous data

⁴ To these five strategies another one was added which does not target any Veneto's FUA, and it covers the area of Asolano-Castellana-Montebellunese.

across multiple municipalities. Being able to identify the appropriate indicators, it is not only important for what concerns the delineation of the functional area, but it is also extremely relevant in the phase of designing and monitoring the strategy. In order to collect and harmonize data, administrations have established partnerships with local universities and/or research institutes. In Brno, for example, the collaboration with the local university allowed to develop an evidence-based method to delimitate the targeted area. The delimitation was based on analyses of spatial arrangements and the intensity of spatial (functional) relations, using five main indicators: commuting to work; commuting to schools; migrations flows; public transport accessibility; and individual transport accessibility. As a result, the Brno Metropolitan Area (BMA) was defined with a perimeter rather similar to the one established by the OECD-EC definition of FUA. The BMA became a relevant scale for territorial analysis and since 2014 a series of investigation, data collection and production concerned the wider territorial area.

The implementation of the SUD strategy also served as an important trigger for the establishment of inter-municipal cooperation previously lacking. It was a test bed for implementing organizational integration, in the sense of a common coordinated approach of engagement of the stakeholders of the territory based on the partnership principle. The process was not exempt from challenges that could hinder the cooperation (scale imbalances among municipalities, contradictory priorities as emerging from diverse territories, conflicts among decision makers); nonetheless, it seems particularly relevant that the functional area approach has been internalized by other processes, becoming a catalyst for innovative institutional metropolitan cooperation (Feřtrová, 2018).

As the case of Brno highlights, when there is a lack of a common institutional framework, the consensus and cooperation among different public administrations becomes even more crucial, while clearly also more challenging. Territorial integration requires the creation of governance systems that enable policy coherence in spatially and economically homogenous, but politically fragmented, areas. The choice of how to proceed can be different according to the previous experience in terms of territorial cooperation. For example in Poland, central government guidance stipulated two possible models for cooperation: to form an association of municipalities, or to reach formal agreement between municipalities. Some smaller municipalities that have limited experience of working together have opted for formal agreements, but some larger municipalities where there is already experience with similar initiatives have opted for the association model.

Governance arrangements become even more complex when strategies involve actions on multiple scales. In many cases in France, even when the strategy looks at a metropolitan area or at a large agglomeration, often the interventions are targeting neighbourhoods within that area.

In addition, there can be a problem of political legitimation and responsibility with respect to the new territorial dimension, which can be even more substantial in case of power imbalances among the municipalities that constitute the functional area.

In order to promote and support territorial integration, new bodies have emerged in a number of Member States, or existing bodies have taken on new roles. These bodies may facilitate collaboration between different localities, take on responsibilities for management and implementation, or have advisory capacities.

Coherent functional area planning approach requires the establishment of shared governance process that enables dynamic interaction across spatial scales, policy issues, land-use functions, and a wide range of stakeholders.

Conclusions

Cities in Europe have changed. A trend towards regionalisation has involved also European cities, and a new urban question has arisen. Even if the European city model has proven to be quite stable, at the same time the capacity to govern of the new urban configurations cannot be taken for granted.

The EU urban policy discourse seems to have acknowledged the emergence of new spatialities. One of main signal is the emphasis that has been put on the new territorial typology of functional urban areas. Born as a statistical categorisation, the concept has entered also the policy discourse, and today it is used to indicate strategic planning spaces to promote Sustainable Urban Development.

That has been reflected also in the implementation of SUD strategies during the 2014-2020 programming period. The analysis shows, in fact, a growing trend towards developing strategic frameworks for wider territorial areas, across administrative boundaries. At the same time the analysis also shows that in those cases it is not correct to talk about strategies applied to Functional Urban Areas as intended in the statistical definition. The areas targeted by the strategies in the majority of cases does not overlap with FUAs, in some cases they concerns conurbation of small-medium sized towns outside metropolitan regions, in some cases twin cities. It is then more appropriate to talk of a *functional area approach* intended as a space – usually different from administrative boundaries - in which a specific territorial interdependence (or function) occurs, and may need to be governed jointly.

The implications of adopting this new approach to EU supported policy-making are relevant. In particular, it entails the need of establishing new governance systems, across administrative boundaries and scales, triggering cooperation processes among municipalities often in the absence of pre-existing institutional frameworks. To this respect there are various practices across the EU. What seems to be still far to be reached, is the potentiality of using these new strategic planning spaces to tackle the most impellent emerging urban questions. The questions tackled so far are more traditional physical or infrastructural issues as well as economic/job related issues, while most up-to-date themes, which probably require also more innovative solutions, struggle to be considered.

Concluding, the analysis shows that the functional area approach could become a new paradigm for EU supported policy making, even if it is not yet. While the statistical definition is clear, what is intended with the functional area approach in strategic terms is still not commonly shared across the EU. A thicker debate around it should be promoted, acknowledging the variabilities that the discourse could assume in the various countries, and individuating more clearly the pillars characterising such an approach.

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