

2. Synthesis of comments on the final report ESPON 1.1.2, “Urban-rural relations in Europe”

Author of the synthesis: Grégory Hamez, from UMS RIATE (ECP France)

Authors of the comments:

ECP	Experts
Belgium	Pierre Cornut, IGEAT – Université Libre de Bruxelles, and Sarah Luyten, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Czech Republic	Lubor Fridrich and Josef Markvart, Institute for spatial development, Brno
Denmark	Lise Herslund, Danish Centre for Forest, Landscape and Planning
France	Nathalie Bertrand and Vincent Briquel, CEMAGREF, Grenoble
Malta	Saviour Formosa, Malta Environment & Planning Authority
The Netherlands	Susanne Vleeshouwers and Tom Maas, Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM)
Norway	Olaf Foss and Dag Juvkam, NIBR
Poland	Andrzej Stasiak, Institute of geography and spatial organization, Polish Academy of Sciences
Sweden	Mats Johansson, ITPS, Swedish Institute for Growth Policy Studies
United Kingdom	Cliff Hague, Heriot-Watt University

I] Report summary

The report is subdivided into three parts: a condensed summary in part 1, the method and results in part 2 and the annexes in part 3.

The TPG aims at defining and featuring urban-rural relations in Europe, in order to infer policy recommendations at the European level.

- In the heart of the report is the definition between what is rural and what is urban. This is a challenge as the difference between the two is increasingly blurred, at various paces across Europe. The authors characterise then the urban-rural relations following two strands: their structural properties (established land use patterns, settlement structure and the distribution of population) and their functional properties (factual use of the physical environment such as various forms of production, consumption and communication).
- This distinction leads to the so-called “harmonised typology” crossing the degree of human intervention (in terms of land cover) with the degree of urban influence (in terms of density and belonging to a functional urban area), which provides an unusual picture of Europe. This typology also presents the interest to be adaptable at NUTS 5 (see the examples of Belgium and Austria).
- Furthermore, through diverse case studies, urban-rural relations are expressed in more qualitative terms: conflicts between “urban” and “rural”, for example with the pressure from the urban areas to locate resource facilities such as water treatment plants in the rural areas; complementary practices, for example when both rural and urban actors stand to gain by a more effective use of rural resources, like the biomass.
- The policies affecting urban-rural relationships are taken into account at the EU level and at the national level (for the latter, a questionnaire survey was undertaken). As a result, the ambitions of the ESDP to promote urban-rural linkages in order to foster sustainable development, face several obstacles: there is only little support from the sectoral policies at the EU level, while in the national policies urban-rural cooperation often looks like a subsidiary in relation to the main aims of the policies.
- The management of urban-rural relations also questions the connexions between the property markets and planning regulation. The magnitude of unearned profits in the development of rural land to urban areas is a major concern; and the national practices are very different to this respect. The “laissez-faire” often leads to urban sprawl; urban containment (i.e densification of urban areas) is an alternative to this. This question deserves further political discussions, at different geographical scales.
- The policy recommendations are expressed in relation to these results, and concern the structural as well as sectoral policies of the EU. These recommendations take into account the different sides and scales of the urban-rural question and consist in a coherent whole: quality of life in cities of different size; public transportation; village regeneration; promotion of indigenous activities; securing the significance of agriculture; bottom-up approach; promoting tendering and competition in all the phases of the land development process so as to avoid land speculation.

The experts from ECPs generally expressed positive feedbacks on the quality of the report, from a national point of view (the way the national territories are represented) and from a scientific point of view (relevance of the methodology). These positive comments came with several suggestions for improving the quality of territorial coverage, or precisions as regards the methodology. In the following pages ECP comments are further detailed.

II] Strategic reflection

a. From a national point of view

Following the majority of ECPs who commented on the report, the global trends described in the report do fit the trends in their national territories (ECP Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom). The Danish expert resumes each of the trends which take place in Denmark too, namely the blur of urban and rural, past urban sprawl and suburbanisation, rurbanisation along transport corridors, the challenge of increased use of private cars in larger labour catchment areas. The Belgian expert considers that the results of the case study on Belgium, following which Belgium is “depressing”, is quite in accordance with the actual widespread typical suburbanisation of the country. The expert from United Kingdom adds some nuances: the report notes “the potency of the ‘rural idyll’ in Britain”, but this is more the image of England than of the rest of Britain (see rural Wales and rural Scotland, with problems of remote rural areas). He also underlines that the authors used the substantial literature on rural restructuring and the deconstruction of rural texts, existing in the UK.

And as regards the policy recommendations, the French, Dutch and Danish experts find numerous connections with the situation in their respective countries: importance of transport and mobility with regard to urban sprawl (DK, NL), bottom-up approach and implication of the citizens in the procedures (F, NL)... but each of the recommendations is of course not always relevant: for example, in France the public intervention ways on the land market already exist through the “Etablissements Publics Fonciers”; other recommendations are far more crucial like helping urban regeneration, still little developed in France, or improving public-private cooperation.

Besides these general positive impressions, the experts also express some reservations as regards the Scandinavian countries, the Eastern European countries and the micro-countries:

- The Norwegian experts regret that Norway is absent from the most interesting maps and analyses, due to data limitations. This is a pity all the most because the general reasoning of the project is clearly relevant in the Norwegian case. Further projects on the topic should give the priority to fill this gap.

The Swedish expert insists on the specificity of the urban-rural structure in Sweden, Finland and Norway, sparsely populated countries and thus rather different to the continental and English ones. The report mentions it very well, but the expert wishes the report looked at a more local scale, within the communities (NUTS5), because the delimitation between built-up centres and surrounding areas is often very hard to draw at this local scale.

The expert mentions a last feature of the Swedish territory which would deserve further

discussions: whereas a high share of artificial surfaces is in general correlated positively with a high population density, Sweden is an example of the reverse case. Some explanations would have been welcome.

- The Polish and Czech experts express other concerns. Several of the trends described in the report can be found in Poland: for example the urban sprawl around medium and big cities (an “Act of Spatial Development” delivered in March 2003 advocates the creation of spatial plans, but has not been put into practice to date); chaotic development of local entities with high environmental values; transformation of Polish villages into multifunctional villages, at different paces following the regions of Poland. Nevertheless, the Polish expert feels difficult to infer from the analyses some concrete elements to the Polish case. Following him one of the problems is linked to the choice of thresholds, like the average European density in the harmonised typology. The French expert shares this view, noting that the choices result in similar uniform patterns for example in Danube countries and France, whereas the Italian territory looks more contrasted. The way of working the Corine Land Cover data looks also questionable as regards the significant artificial surfaces in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.
The Czech expert also points out different trends from the report occurring in his country, like the high commuting rates from villages to towns, or suburbanisation around middle sized and large cities. But he underlines the singularity of the Czech rural areas, where almost all agricultural land underwent the process of collectivisation. The restitution programme brought many difficulties, and many farmers are forced to close their farms.
- Following the ECP Malta, the situation of insular small states is insufficiently taken into consideration. Furthermore, all the data required in the report exist at the Central Office of Statistics from Malta and are available on the MEPA website (see www.mepa.org.mt and www.nso.org.mt). The ECP Malta provides a description of Malta realities (urbanisation rhythm during the second half of the XXth Century, coalescence of numerous villages and global growth of urban areas, arising pressures on the land and an exacerbation of transport problems). Actually this is a matter of scale, the European level does not allow to grasp the Maltese specificity.

Other points of discrepancy between the report and the national situations are expressed, more at the margin:

- The Netherlands expert has some doubts on the recommendations regarding municipal land banks and an undisturbed municipal building site release: “although the aim of preventing speculation is beyond dispute, it doesn’t take in consideration sufficiently what the role of the free-market is, at least in the Netherlands”
- The French experts appreciate the review of national policies across Europe and share the conclusion as regards the weakness of an explicit account of urban-rural relations within the policies, but regret that France is not mentioned (questionnaire survey, p.133 and following). On one hand, this is surprising because the French experts were contacted and answered to the questionnaire; on the other hand, it is a pity because new national laws approved for the ten last years seem better answering the question of urban-rural relations, and should have been taken into account (e.g. the law “SRU”, Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbain). The British expert expresses a similar comment, noting that

- “the questionnaire failed to achieve full coverage of all countries within ESPON space, and in the UK has focused on English policies only”.
- The Danish expert does not share the finding in the report that Denmark would be very affected by urban sprawl, because of many artificial surfaces per capita. Actually, following the expert there is in Denmark a “somewhat effective planning regulation for the open land, so that the physical expression of “rurbanisation” is not so pronounced as maybe in other countries”. So this kind of result would need further consideration.
 - The UK expert underlines several UK specificities absent from the report. For example, in Scotland the lobby tensions between urban and rural result in “ ‘areas in between’ urban areas consisting of a rather polycentric pattern of small towns”, and the report did not get to grips such dilemmas. Besides, the question of the interrelation between property markets and housing markets is at the top of the policy and research agenda in the UK, especially since the so-called Barker Report (2004). This point would have deserved more attention.

b. From a general point of view

The following two questions have been answered by only a few ECPs. Answering them supposes a thorough knowledge of the other ESPON reports and on the ESDP, which proves over-ambitious... Actually it is not so frequent to find national experts having in mind the European perspective and able to react on ESPON reports. Only answer attempts are provided here.

Focussing on policy recommendations by other TPG’s: do you see common or contradicting points?

Four ECPs tried to answer this question, and see no contradiction with the recommendations from the other TPGs (the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom). The Netherlands expert compares the 1.1.2 policy recommendations with those from 1.1.1, 1.2.1, 2.1.1 and 2.2.3, which does not show any contradiction. The Swedish expert finds also that the recommendations are not contradictory nor complementary of the other TPGs, and explains it because they are really specific to 112.

The UK expert finds no contradictions between urban-rural recommendations and those from 111, 132 and 213, but underlines that “the strong endorsement given by the Urban-rural relations report for the idea of protecting agricultural land understates the extent to which agricultural intensification has been environmentally harmful (a key theme in 132) and the issues about agricultural protectionism in relation to the development in poorer countries in other continents (cf. 132 and 342)”. More emphasis could also have been put on the IT urban-rural divide (cf. 122).

Focussing on the ESDP: which policy recommendations correspond and which conflict with the ESDP’s basic concepts?

The ECPs found no major conflict between the policy recommendations and the ESDP objectives. In the ESDP, besides the aim of polycentricity, a focus is put on the functional interrelationships of urban areas with their surrounding countryside. The ESDP emphasises also

the high diversity of rural-urban links, resulting in different potentials of development. The policy recommendations and the report are really in line with these objectives and principles, above all the ones related to the development in the rural areas (ECP Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden). Nevertheless, two from these four ECPs point out potential inconsistencies with the ESDP aims of promoting a polycentric urban system: this promotion is likely to generate more rural-urban relations and this can have “unsustainable effects” (ECP Denmark), and “result in an unbalanced spatial development” (ECP Sweden). Thus, the Swedish expert suggests a better connection with polycentricity in order to avoid any misunderstanding. The UK expert is more sceptical, and does not feel that “the report has really taken us very far through the implications of the ESDP aims and the tensions within them and between them at different scales”.

Two ECPs ask for more precisions between the purpose of the project and the ESDP: the Belgian experts would have appreciated more in-depth discussions on it in the Executive Summary; the French experts suggest that the authors could have taken the opportunity in the report to define more explicitly some terms coming from the ESDP, like the notion of sustainability (what does mean an “improvement of urban-rural relation sustainability”?).

Last, the Maltese expert notes that the ESDP itself does not take sufficiently into consideration particular issues of the small insular states, where the blur between urban and rural is quite original (cf. significance of the coast: the urban-rural issue must be complexified with the urban-coastal / rural-coastal sides).

The general idea emerging from these comments is that the potential conflicts between the report and the ESDP are due to internal inconsistencies within the ESDP, between its objectives.

III] Methodological matters

a. Do you consider the project scientifically well grounded?

From the ten ECPs who commented on the report, eight expressed very positive impressions on the scientific quality of the report. One ECP chose not to answer this question (ECP Netherlands: the expert did not feel like giving feedback on the complex research methods because he is a policy-maker and not a scientist). And one ECP has more mixed reactions (ECP UK: the expert notes that in this project as in most of ESPON projects, different intellectual traditions are put together, e.g. traditional geography, spatial analysis, political economy, etc.; as a result, “the report as a whole is not really consistent in the way it approaches and interprets urban-rural relations”).

It has to be noted that the TPG 112 adopted a particular theoretical standpoint: it chose the urban perspective (ECPs Denmark and France). Following the French experts, the rural dimension is not considered in its particulars but from the point of view of urban expectations; moreover, “to some extent, the empirical analyses are too one-sided towards large urban areas” (ECP Denmark). This standpoint does not raise any problem. The only point is that it could have been

more explicitly expressed. The Polish expert shares this point of view, underlining that the authors are more successful in defining urban areas than rural areas.

Several comments were provided, and must be considered as possible alternatives and not as challenging the report's framework. These comments are hereafter summed up following the three strands of the research framework: the statistical measures and indicators (including the typology); the case studies; the analysis of policies (questionnaire survey).

The comments on the statistical analyses highlight the following points:

- *The terminology.* The Polish expert wonders how it is possible to bring together the results of the report with the existing definitions of urban and rural areas in the national statistical offices, because these definitions are so different between the countries. This raises important questions on the possibility to compare basic data, so the expert asks for going further in the terminological attempt. Besides, the French experts would have appreciated more detailed information on the definition of indicators, namely the “market accessible from each NUTS3” or the “index of population centrality”.
- *The statistical analysis* is considered well-grounded, although it raises some questions. The Belgian experts stress that the authors could have tried other methods than the national or European average to show the main spatial differences: “methods such as natural breaks, combination of mean and standard deviation, or multivariate analysis should be privileged”. The Swedish expert adds a methodological note: “in some cases standard deviations are used in comparing different categories. Here, it would perhaps be better to use the coefficient of variance as the level of the included regions or countries then is neutralized (see e.g. chapter 3.3.4 and graph 3.3)”.
- *The time-span.* Following the Swedish expert, the report could perhaps have been even better with a longer time span “in order to describe and analyse the processes behind the changing urban-rural relations in EU29 today”. He is joined by the Polish expert, who specifies that the rhythms of evolution of the urban-rural relations are highly diverse between the 29 countries. But the two experts minor these critics and say that they highly appreciate the part describing the historical developments.
- *The basic ideas behind the typology and the statistical analyses.* In fact, the harmonised typology expresses structure elements (morphology of urban and rural areas) and not functional elements (the data on the flows and relations were withdrawn) (ECP France). Moreover, it would perhaps have been possible “to show more than the traditional differences between urban versus peripheral areas”, although the work is well documented and argued (ECP Denmark).
- There is a last comment on the usefulness of the typology. The French experts are positively impressed by the typology, because it raises many original related questions: “Can the “urban influences” be put into different categories? Do they create some dynamics in favour of integrating the rural areas in functional urban regions, to the benefit of towns and countryside, and which are the main drivers of integration?”. Nevertheless, in the report there is no clear link between the typology and such questions, and the text

does not take advantage enough from the typology. A reason for this is probably that the typology expresses above all “structure” matters, and these questions (addressed in the chapters 4 to 6) are related to flows. The French experts add that the typological work in the final report of TPG 111 looks more fruitful as the latter more concretely uses the results of the typology in the text.

- The *geographical scale*. The possibility to adapt the typology to a more local scale is considered as a strength (see the examples at NUTS5 in the cases of Belgium and Austria), and several ECPs would have welcome further analyses at this local level: the Maltese expert says that only at this local level the insularity issues would have been properly identified; the French experts expect that “précising the typology at NUTS5 level would help answering several questions, like what is the spatial extent of towns (...)?” Following the Norwegian expert, more explicit considerations of scale and coverage should be inserted in the typology, in the perspective of a follow-up.

The comments on the case studies are rather limited. The Danish and British experts only express a reservation on the selection of case studies: “there is an overrepresentation of case studies around metropolitan and large urban areas” (ECP Denmark); “the case studies vary in length, depth and focus (...) [they are not] really providing the kind of depth analysis that would be desirable” (ECP UK) – the expert concedes that it can be understood as regards the very limited resources available for the project.

This comment can be joined to the previous one on the geographical scale: many ECPs feel difficult to bridge the results at the European level with the national level. Actually, they are aware of a higher diversity of rural areas and urban-rural relations in their country, at the local level, than what is described in the report, and a way to better understand this typology and its usefulness at the national level would perhaps be through further studies at NUTS5 (ECPs Belgium, Denmark, France, Malta, Norway, Poland, United Kingdom).

The analysis of policies is made by a questionnaire survey. This analysis is generally considered as convincing: it avoids “to get lost in an exhaustiveness attempt encompassing the policies with direct or indirect spatial impacts” (ECP France); and the active involvement of the MC and ECP is a sign of a constructive networking, that could be “encouraged within ESPON programme” (ECP Belgium).

Nevertheless, there are also some methodological limits. According to the French experts, the questionnaire is not structured enough: the respondents were asked to provide examples of policies which seemed particularly relevant to them. And of course the answer to such a question differs following the background of the persons, their institution, their position in the organisation... This results in a huge diversity, and the outputs lack of frame. Besides, according to the UK expert, the quantification attempts are not appropriate to this kind of policy analysis (e.g. this sentence from the report: “sixteen per cent of the policies emphasized prevention of urban sprawl”, section 2.2.1).

Moreover and always following the French experts, the term “policy” is not well defined: “it is used in a rather fuzzy way, as a mixture of laws, programmes or plans”. The French experts suggest that the questionnaire could have been framed after an idea emerging from the report:

“the significance of land management and of planning in the urban-rural relations”. At the border between the case studies and policy analyses, the British expert suggests the need for “case studies to explore issues of power, the limits of intervention, the responses of the markets, and the tensions between competing policies”.

The Danish expert has another suggestion: “some case studies of the actual administration of policies could have added another dimension”.

b. Do you consider the relation between scientific results and policy recommendations strong enough?

The ECP experts have different opinions on the relation between scientific results and policy recommendations.

First, the Norwegian expert underlines that the mere possibility to infer, from a research work, any normative elements which can be used in the policy arena is not obvious: “the scientific results never/seldom have unambiguous policy implications” and there are always relevant alternative recommendations.

Second, the French experts remind that the exercise of drawing the policy recommendations is usually tricky, as regards “the risk of spreading the idea that there are some recipes which can be implemented anywhere”. But the authors succeed in avoiding this shortcoming.

In this context, the link between research results and policy recommendations is not presented as a problem, and most of the time the policy recommendations look scientifically grounded (ECP Czech Republic, Norway and Sweden). Nevertheless, the following points are raised:

- the recommendations related to the mechanisms of the free market seem not based on the research done (ECP Netherlands);
- some of the policy recommendations seem to be based more on theoretical ideas than on empirical findings (ECP Denmark); most of them are reasonable observations, but remain generalised and vague (ECP UK). The British expert is particularly sceptical as regards the policy recommendations on functional urban-rural relations (6.4.3): “the report has not really been able to produce concrete proposals backed by evidence and theory on this matter”, probably due to the “stress on data and indicators”.
- some of them are more of “wishful thinking” than scientifically based (ECP Sweden, United Kingdom);
- they could be better developed with “indication of their potential implications, feasibility and degree of urgency” (ECP Belgium).

In order to overcome these problems, the Swedish expert suggests that between the scientific results and the policy recommendations, there is room for something like the “policy implications”. On one hand, these *implications* would be scientifically based, on the other hand the *recommendations* could include other theoretical elements not directly inferred from the results. This suggestion looks very interesting in the perspective of ESPON2.

c. Are the chosen core indicators and the measurements simple enough to be covered by other research teams in different areas (Nuts 2, or Nuts 3)?

Following the ECP Norway and Sweden, these indicators and measurements look simple enough. They are perhaps even too simple, as the Danish expert says: for instance, the model would be stronger if it took into account more regional types than the only metropolitan / peripheral areas. And the British expert adds that the problem of data remains crucial: “the indicators can be considered by other teams, but the same problems will be encountered until data becomes more harmonised, and even then convincing time series data will be at a premium”.

d. Focussing on the scale of analysis: did the scale of some data and indicators show to be misleading?

The scale proved to be misleading in the case of artificial surfaces in the Scandinavian countries: the Danish and the Swedish ECPs observe that the artificial surfaces are over-represented in their countries, giving the wrong impression of an urban sprawl. But it is all the contrary: for instance in Denmark, an analysis at a lower level “would probably show more clearly that it is because Denmark has many roads also to more peripheral areas. It is not houses or strip malls spread around in the open land”.

The Belgian experts take this question as an opportunity to stress a basic problem: the non-comparability of NUTS3 across Europe, and so the need for a combination of NUTS2/3 to have a better image of Europe (see the case of Germany where the NUTS3 correspond as entities urban or rural, and the case of France where the most of NUTS3 contain both rural and urban areas). The Swedish expert shares this critic of the current NUTS3, “that can give a skewed picture of the urban-rural dimension in Europe”. The Belgian experts suggest that this failing could be prevented by analyses at NUTS5 level, harmonised through smoothing methods.

Actually the large majority of ECPs converge to ask for analyses at a more local level, the NUTS 5 (Belgium, Denmark, France, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, United Kingdom). As the British expert points out, “the nature of conflicts over land development is that it is rarely if ever conducted at a NUTS2 or NUTS3 level”.

IV] Programming of further research

As the report is generally considered as coherent and well-grounded, the “programming of further research” is focused more on specifying the implications of the report on the different national contexts or on particular questions already addressed in the report, than on proposing radically new fields of research. Moreover, several experts stress that the fields of research proposed in the report for further studies seem well funded (ECP France, Norway).

The following issues could be considered in a follow-up of this project:

- There is a strong need to carry out research at a very local level (NUTS5), shared by all the ECPs who commented on this report.
- The ECPs from the new EU member states often express some difficulties to apply the results in their national context; they remind all the differences in the definition of “urban” and “rural” between the countries (ECP Poland), the specificity of the de-collectivization process in the ex-communist countries (ECP Czech Republic), or the peculiar features of small island states (ECP Malta). Researchers from these countries should be better integrated in the next phases of ESPON.
Besides, even in the countries where researchers are well inserted in ESPON like the Scandinavian countries, further studies are needed to better represent these territories (ECP Sweden). These countries are at different stages of development in the urban-rural relations, so a longer time span should also be considered.
- As the report focuses above all on the case of rural areas around large urban areas, the role of small and medium-sized towns would deserve further analyses, especially “as they are in critical situation in many parts of Europe” (ECP Denmark, Sweden, United Kingdom); the new project on small and medium sized cities “may pick up some of the issues about sustaining services in remoter rural areas” (ECP United Kingdom). The question of agricultural land close to urban areas is also very interesting (ECP Belgium, Denmark). The British and Danish experts share the idea that remoter regions, explored by some Interreg projects, would deserve particular attention. The British expert adds a point about changing labour markets in rural areas, with the use of migrants, while the Danish expert stresses other topics like transport corridors and urban sprawl, mobility of people in rural areas, rural areas as consumption spaces, etc. (ECP Denmark)
- The question of land market and public regulation is considered as very interesting for further developments (ECP France), although it should take into account more precisely the reality of the free market (ECP Netherlands). The question of public-private partnerships deserves also further studies, namely to the extent that such partnerships can induce corruption, as the report points out (ECP Denmark). Last, “ESPON should be looking much more at the spatiality of housing markets and labour markets and at the way that national and regional policies and their implementation (or non-implementation) share space that is significant for the wider European development trajectory” (ECP United Kingdom)
- In connection to this point, more attention should be paid to “housing markets and equity aspects of access to housing finance and to affordable housing”, as they are important to wider cohesion (ECP UK).
- Some connections are requested with the topics addressed by other TPGs: for instance with the 213 on the Common Agricultural Policy (ECP Belgium and Czech Republic), with the 111 on Polycentrism (ECP France), with the 114 on Demography because “the analysis of expanding and dynamic rural areas is of utmost importance” (ECP Sweden). Amongst the other ideas, the ECP Belgium asks to take into account that the sustainable development is not only economic and ecological but also social – this can be measured via a kind of composite index of sustainable development