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The best of both worlds – what lies between town and countryside? The PURPLE case

Town and countryside, a dualism deeply rooted in our thinking, and in our languages. But our languages failed to evolve since town walls were dismantled, and do not account for the obvious fact that there is something else, something between the cities and the rural areas.

Of course there are various attempts to name that zone, e.g. ‘countryside around towns’, ‘urbanised countryside’ or ‘urban fringe’, to name but a few: A group of planners sitting together would easily find some 20 alternative wordings within a couple of minutes. But let’s face it: To have a set of many ill-defined and potentially overlapping descriptions means you cannot name it properly, and what you can’t name doesn’t exist¹.

There is evidence that this leads to problems for metropolitan regions because large proportions of them aren’t addressed properly: It doesn’t affect Paris, Amsterdam or Barcelona, but what about Tremblay-en-France, Haarlemmermeer or El Prat de Llobregat (the towns where the airports are located) and the other hundreds of towns and cities next or near to the big players? Take Rüsselsheim as another example: This is where the Opel car factory is located – 25 km away from Frankfurt but central in the region. We claim that they all are being overlooked systematically, as *neither-nor*, where nobody knows whether programmes and policies for cities or for rural areas apply. And this is what Europe cannot afford: Missing chances for those areas that contribute substantially to the Lisbon and Gothenburg aims.

¹ Scientifically, this is about *constructs*, terms to denote theoretical concepts – and our thinking is inevitably based on them (see Walter Schönwandt, “Planning in Crisis? – Theoretical Orientations for Architecture and Planning, Ashgate 2008, p. 72)

There is no such thing as a right definition², but an attempt published recently we found disappointing: The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion relied on the OECD Urban-Rural Classification³, a data driven approach that leads to some silly results (the North Sea Island of Texel is said to be as urban as central Paris, Copenhagen's outskirts are said to be as remote as the Outer Hebrides) and fails to paint a differentiated picture that reflects the reality as perceived by a group of metropolitan regions who joined forces in PURPLE, the Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe, a network of 14 European Regions. PURPLE advocates a problems first approach to promote what we call the peri-urban region. PURPLE responded to the Green Paper, as it contributes to political debates concerning peri-urban issues, like peri-urban agriculture which formed a focus in recent months.

More information, including policy documents, on www.purple-eu.org.

² Any definition is an *agreement* and can be helpful, acceptable and clear, it needs to be precise at the core and will necessarily be blurred at the edges, but it cannot be true or false.

³ Commission Staff Working Document Accompanying the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion Turning territorial division into strength, Comm(2008) 616 final