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### The social sustainability of European cities

*The importance of local government*

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A satellite night view of Europe, where the landmasses are dark and the city lights are bright yellow and orange, creating a glowing pattern across the continent. The background is a deep blue-black space.

# Urban Europe

*Fifty Tales of the City*

EDITED BY

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen

## Urban Europe



# Urban Europe

*Fifty Tales of the City*

*Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (eds.)*

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## 27. The social sustainability of European cities

The importance of local government

*Sako Musterd and Jan Nijman*

The European Union is the result of political processes at national and international levels in which national states agree to relinquish power and influence to the Union. The consequences of European integration can however mostly be seen and felt at the regional and local levels. Because the European population is highly urbanised, this is especially true of the cities and towns. About three out of four Europeans currently live in cities and towns, and in the Netherlands and Belgium this figure is actually more than nine out of ten. In the cities, one might say, the consequences of European integration can be seen under a magnifying glass.

The influence of European integration on the urban environment is exerted directly through policy and regulation – one good example is the internationalisation of cities resulting from free mobility of capital and labour. But we can also identify an important indirect influence in the form of the dominant free-market ideology that steers the process of integration: an ideology that is shared at the national levels and that trickles down to, and has an effect on, the urban environment. In the case of the Netherlands we see this, for instance, in the growth of the private housing market as compared to the social housing sector, or in the influence of increasing – ideologically tolerated – income disparities on the urban environment and residential segregation.

Urban culture is formed historically and often has local roots, certainly in a country like the Netherlands where the urban population has been in the majority for almost four hundred years. But urban culture is increasingly subject to international influences. To an increasing extent, the urban environment reflects the

political spirit and policymaking at European level. As a result, the social sustainability of our cities and towns is increasingly at stake. Social sustainability refers to the ongoing viability of urban society as formed in a historical-geographic context. The concept of social sustainability forces one to reflect on the nature of urban society as desired (at a local level), and about democratic urban policy.

This should not necessarily be understood as a criticism of European integration. There are many arguments in favour of its major political significance. Moreover, European integration can provide a major economic stimulus for certain cities and regions. But this can be at the expense of other towns, cities and regions. Even if a particular city benefits as a whole, as measured in terms of economic growth, this can go in hand in hand with economic, social and spatial restructuring. The point is that the effects of European integration (and globalisation in general) can present a challenge to local social structures and democracy.

The Netherlands and its towns and cities are doing relatively well, certainly when compared to regions in the south and the east of Europe. But in terms of subjective wellbeing it is of little significance for the local urban population of, say, Amsterdam to consider how the citizens of Lisbon or Athens are currently faring. What is much more important for the citizens of Amsterdam is how today's and tomorrow's situation compares to that of yesterday – in Amsterdam.

We will confine ourselves here to three urban challenges facing local policymakers in the Netherlands (but also in France, Germany and Belgium, for instance): problems of growth and shrinkage in the Dutch urban landscape, the importance of diversity of the urban population, and the need for social cohesion in the intended participatory society.

## **Growth and shrinkage in the dynamic European landscape**

The accelerated global economic dynamism can lead to relatively drastic new growth and development of urban areas. We see

such growth occurring above all in metropolitan regions that are well-anchored in the international economy and that offer optimum 'classical' location-determining factors (accessibility, infrastructure, presence of higher education). Growth is not only a physical urban or economic phenomenon, but is also linked to an increase in social capital, with the ability to participate in society. In the Netherlands this can be seen above all in the Randstad conurbation, in particular the Amsterdam region. However, this growth is accompanied by shrinkage and decline in neighbouring regions. While the old regional-economic concept of 'cumulative causation' was mostly used to explain ongoing spatially concentrated growth in strong regions, we now also need to consider 'cumulative shrinkage'. Certain regions and towns or cities are confronted with a downward spiral: unemployment and ageing of the population are increasing, investments are falling, amenities (such as schools and hospitals) are disappearing and social engagement is coming under pressure.

Growth and shrinkage are usually mutually related. The population departing from shrinkage areas usually heads for the growth areas, increasing the growth in locations to which they move, but also exacerbating the shrinkage in the places they are leaving. In line with this, Amsterdam and Eindhoven are welcoming the young people whom the regions of Zeeuws Vlaanderen and Limburg are losing. Research shows that sometimes the population is the decisive factor in shrinkage regions, but that in other cases it is actually economic developments that trigger the shrinkage. Growth and shrinkage can lie far from each other in spatial terms, but usually they are very close together (city and surrounding region). The term 'periphery' is thus a scale-sensitive and relative term. Parkstad Limburg, a region dealing with shrinkage, is sometimes described as peripheral (with respect to the growing Randstad), but seen from another perspective the region is actually very close to growth areas such as Aachen and Maastricht. The economic and social decline of specific towns, cities and regions usually affects formerly well-developed industrial areas that, since the

1980s, have not been able to make the transition to the post-industrial era. The American experience, strongly determined by a large-scale free market and without substantial local or regional policy corrections, provides a warning: in that country, the consequences of shrinkage have proved disastrous for cities such as Detroit and Cleveland, and for large urban areas in metropolitan areas such as Miami and Philadelphia. In the Netherlands we have been able, so far, to prevent such excessive trends and spatial polarisation through central taxation and redistribution through resources such as the Municipal Fund. This has made it possible to guide cities with a relatively one-sided industrial structure, such as Enschede, Tilburg and Rotterdam, through a difficult phase of economic restructuring. But nonetheless shrinkage has rapidly increased in recent years and will increasingly need to be combated by means of multi-level governance. Public administration plays an important role in regional steering to retain amenities in selected locations where this intervention will prove most efficient, and where it will also have a positive influence on private investments and on employment.

## **Diversity and sustainability**

The classic urban sociologist Louis Wirth stated that the essence of urbanism is found in a social dynamic based on a population concentration of a minimum size, density and heterogeneity. The combination of density and heterogeneity, said Wirth, is the most important condition for dynamism and social renewal. Therefore, it also lies at the root of the sustainable strength and resilience of an urban society. In some American cities this dynamism is undermined by extensive suburbanisation and sprawl. Dutch and European cities are, for the most part, more compact and have a higher density. But now the heterogeneity here is coming under increasing pressure, especially in the inner cities.

Urban economy, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation are to a great extent conditioned by diversity among the urban population. Social, economic and demographic diversity contributes to social dynamism and diversification, as well as renewal of economic activities. This diversity is currently under pressure in many (inner) cities – something well-illustrated in Amsterdam. The area within the Amsterdam ring road has rapidly gentrified and internationalised. The current workings of the housing market leave little opportunity for lower income groups, the social housing sector is ‘locked down’ and the higher prices in the private sector block access by young people and recent graduates to the housing market in this area (which constitutes half the city).

This is an important demographic cohort – also including the creative entrepreneurs and middle-class citizens of tomorrow – that is currently having huge difficulty in acquiring a place in the city. The current poor workings of the housing market could lead to an economic backlash in the future. The private market currently provides no way out: the strong demand and the limited supply of housing in the private sector are pushing up prices even further. It is up to politicians and local authorities to take the long view and to create access to the housing market for starting entrepreneurs, young people and those with medium (and lower) incomes, thus creating a sustainable dynamism in the urban economy.

## **Social cohesion in the urban society**

The recent Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) Survey 28 examines the moral and instrumental aspects of social inequality. The report explains the negative effects of extensive social inequality in, for instance the realms of welfare, economic opportunities, health and chances of survival. Research shows that social inequality in urban society generally goes hand in hand with socio-spatial segregation. The ‘big sort’ (spatial sorting

that leads to segregation and polarisation) usually attributed to American cities is now also increasingly showing itself in Europe – and the Netherlands.

Inequality and segregation are, in turn, associated with disaffiliation: certain sub-classes in the population becoming estranged or alienated from each other. This begins with light segregation, but experiences in Europe, North and South America and Asia show that this can lead to strongly segregated, fragmented and polarised cities in which the middle classes increasingly and literally distance themselves from the lower classes and where forms of cocooning occur, in the area of housing and – as research shows – also in other areas such as work, education and modes of transport. Inequality in access to amenities and facilities, housing and work can generate social tensions and political conflict about ‘the right to the city’. In the Netherlands such trends have long been avoided, but this no longer seems to be the case.

Increasing inequality, spatial segregation and disaffiliation are undermining the social cohesion of society in urban regions of the Netherlands. Social cohesion and a sense of community are not only important for the living quality of the city, but also for the efficient functioning of the market and political sectors. And social cohesion is actually essential for the success of the desired participatory society (consider informal care, for instance). The participatory society, necessitated by a reduction in the welfare state, is all about citizenship, a sense of community, solidarity and social capital. And precisely these qualities seem to be in increasingly short supply.

This too therefore constitutes an important task for local authorities. Because the welfare state no longer guarantees the funding of certain amenities and facilities, it is up to public administrators to facilitate the alternative in the form of the participatory society. Promoting spatial and social diversity and integration is an important resource here, not so much involving the promotion of economic equality, but rather a sense of community. ‘Citizenship and participation,’ says the Dutch

sociologist Evelien Tonkens, 'is not just about redistribution, but also about recognition. Citizenship is a moral-emotional practice.' Citizenship is essential to an everyday urban sense of community and to sustainable social cohesion.

'Europe', in the sense of citizenship and identity, is still a distant abstraction for many people. European integration implies a certain shift of political power and decision-making from national to supranational level, but it also means greater freedom of action for subnational regions and cities. The role of local government is further emphasised by decentralising tendencies inherent to the neoliberal course of national governments, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the European Union.

The importance of the way that citizens experience their own local environment has been dramatically highlighted by the refugee crisis: supranational and national policy are important, of course, but it seems that citizens are above all affected and moved by the local confrontations with asylum seekers, with local relief and accommodation facilities and with the policy choices of their municipalities. This is just one current illustration of the structural role played by local authorities in the development of cities and regions.

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