Pôles métropolitains: the French approach towards inter-city networking

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In France, ‘les pôles métropolitains’ (PM) is the latest central government initiative to reinforce inter-city cooperation (2010). After giving a short overview of French city-networking history, this paper investigates two ‘pôles métropolitains’ to explore the difficulties in achieving efficient inter-city cooperation. It finds that implementing such new tools for urban and economic projects requires new skills and spatial representation for planners, politicians and local administrations. This analysis gives decision-makers concrete examples of pôles métropolitains, focusing on governance issues. It can also help to stimulate progress in constructing a theoretical and critical approach for conceptualizing inter-city networking policy.

Keywords: Pôles métropolitains; inter-city networking; metropolization; governance; France

Introduction

Since the 1960s, France has been a pioneer in the field of spatial policies (Faludi & Peyrony, 2001). However, the potential of inter-city networking remains underdeveloped, despite repeated attempts to ameliorate France’s tendencies towards metropolization. Whilst Greater Paris accounts for one-sixth of France’s population and one-quarter of its gross domestic product (GDP), the provinces are mainly composed of small and medium-sized cities: 50% of the population lives in urban areas with a population under 200,000. For 60 years the central government has tried to limit Paris’s monocentric growth through decentralization (limiting metropolization and reinforcing polycentricity). Its implementation has proven difficult due to France’s complex administrative structure: 36,700 communes, 100 départements and 24 régions, each with specific areas of responsibility.

From a regional perspective, some consider ‘metropolization’ as a selective process reinforcing polarization of a few cities (Krugman, 1991; Puissant & Lacour, 1999) and ‘polycentricity’ – rooted in Christaller’s (1933) mode; as a European planning principle aiming to reduce regional disparities (Faludi, 2004; Davoudi, 2003). At the municipal scale, metropolization may refer to two distinct phenomena: either urban sprawl (Bretagnolle, Paulus, & Pumain, 2001) or the increasing dependence of outer cities upon the core city within a regional system (Motte, 2007). In both definitions, inter-city networking is presented as a tool to implement polycentricity, making each urban core perform a specific role within a broader system. In France, regional metropolises aspire to be multi-polar; the term ‘metropolitan’ is related to the functional role a territory plays in supporting a larger, interconnected system. Nonetheless, metropolization and
Polycentricity share similar theoretical limits, their measurement remains difficult (Meijers, 2008), and definitions vary significantly according to geographical scale.

Recent literature has focused on the increasing complexity of urban system transformations comprising metropolization. DATAR (the French delegation for territorial planning and regional action) developed a series of prospective studies drawing up different scenarios for polycentric development (DATAR, 2011). Some authors point to potential mismatch between the functional territory – the urban area – and the administrative territory – the local municipal structure (Vanier, 2010). Others have questioned the applicability of principles of territorial continuity and exclusive membership in the context of a city with a single local government tier (Lefèvre, 2009). Cooperative structures, such as the pôles métropolitains (PMs), with which this paper deals, serve as ‘joker cards’ to stimulate inter-city cooperation without reforming administrative structures (Béhar, Estèbe, & Vanier, 2011). French literature to date has been restricted to descriptive reports of particular PMs in practice by planning agencies, with few studies offering critical reflection on PM experiments (Agence de développement et d’urbanisme de l’aire urbaine nancéienne (Aduan), 2011; Agence d’urbanisme de Lyon (AUL), 2011). This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing on how PMs operate in the context of metropolization and city governance.

How do inter-municipal networking policies function in the face of these dual pressures? To address that question this paper analyses how successive French inter-city networking initiatives have evolved in terms of the impacts of both metropolization and polycentricity on French planning using two cases examining the recent evolution of inter-city cooperation between stakeholders from different institutional levels: (1) Loire-Bretagne Pôle Métropolitain (LBPM), which pursued inter-city networking in order to position itself on the European map, in contrast to (2) the difficult implementation process of G10 (in Rheims region), epitomizing the sometimes elusive nature of inter-city networking.

Timid evolution versus urgency for cooperation

The administrative structure of France has regularly been criticized as inadequate either to support its position in the global economy (Lefèvre, 2009) or to develop planning projects adapted to metropolitan challenges including inter-city competition and social inclusion (Kresl, 2005). Territorial divisions are numerous and governance fragmented between institutional levels (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006). The inter-city networking initiatives launched to overcome these issues can be divided into four phases:

- Phase 1 (1960s): Métropoles d’équilibre. France’s Parisian centricity has long been considered an obstacle to developing regional capitals and provinces across France (Gravier, 1947). In response to this, DATAR (2011) sought to promote both metropolization and polycentricity since its creation in 1963 (Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of subsequent initiatives). Emblematic of strong top-down spatial planning, the Métropoles d’équilibre policy (1963) enabled eight regional capitals to position themselves on the map.
- Phase 2 (1990s): ‘Réseaux de villes’ and inter-municipalities. Reforms in the 1990s to inter-municipal cooperation were considered a European governance innovation at that time (Lefèvre, 2009), while inter-city network initiatives ameliorated the need for correspondence between functional and institutional territory. In
1991, ‘réseaux de villes’ institutionalized voluntary, informal cooperation between proximate cities with existing stakeholder connections. Abandoned shortly thereafter, the initiative’s legacy connections of the largest ‘réseaux de villes’ foreshadowed the Metropolitan Area Cooperation projects’ architecture.

- Phase 3 (2004–10): Metropolitan Area Cooperation (MAC). From 1999 and the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), polycentric development became an important European planning principle. In response, France launched a call in 2004 for projects for MAC, covering urban networks with a minimum core urban area population of 300 000 and a minimum total network population of 500 000. MACs are shaped by inter-municipalities, with the state acting solely as an adviser (Geppert, 2006). Seventeen projects were approved, this popularity being due at least in part to the offer of central financial incentives at a time of decreasing state funding for local budgets (CITERES, 2007). Though MACs focused primarily on producing territorial analyses (including territorial key datasets, functional analysis and flow mapping), this also represented the first time that the Lisbon Agenda requirement was fulfilled for effective territorial platforms for discussing topics such as economic development, innovation, higher education, culture, planning and transportation (DIACT, 2006).

- Phase 4 (2010 onwards): Pôles Métropolitains (PM): The 2010 Act on ‘Pôles métropolitains’ replaced the notion of metropolitan ‘coopération’ with the creation of ‘pôles’ (cluster/core). Although this terminological vagueness reflects uncertainties whether the project should aim for territorial equilibrium through networking (polycentric development) or reinforce regional cores (metropolization), the argument here is that the PM scheme is a compromise between the two. A PM could be approved on the basis of a far smaller territory than an MAC: a minimum core urban area population of 150 000 was required alongside a minimum whole network population of 300 000. As a result, many territories were eligible: seven PMs have already been created, nine are in the process of being created and a further nine proposals have been received but not yet approved.

Figure 1.
The major novelty of the PM approach lies in the governance structure: it represents the first step toward municipalities sharing competences. As with MACs, inter-municipalities form the decision-making level, but a PM establishes a joint association (‘syndicat-mixte’) with a rotating presidency, enabling the partial transfer of competence to the PM level for similar areas of governance as in an MAC.

**Insights into two distinct areas**

The central operational question in this paper is: how do PMs function in this wider context of metropolization and city governance? To explore this, two PMs are examined and compared: Loire-Bretagne (LBPM) and G10 (Figure 2). Both intend to develop inter-city networking as a planning tool by implementing multi-polar and non-contiguous frameworks. But the need for cooperation differs significantly between the two: G10 is in the early stage of its life cycle compared with the more advanced stage of LBPM.

LBPM, part of a former MAC, was established in 2011. It is located in the West of France, spreading over two régions (Pays-de-la-Loire and Bretagne) and four départements, covering 2.4 million inhabitants. It contains two competing regional capitals (Nantes and Rennes) and three medium-sized, dynamic cities (Angers, Saint-Nazaire and Brest). The area is dynamic and attractive but lacks a European-size metropolis; one of LBPM’s main bid objectives was greater European recognition by internationally promoting higher education and economic projects.

Nantes-Saint-Nazaire was one of the eight métropoles d’équilibre, and subsequently part of an MAC and LBPM. Thus, local stakeholders have been supported since the 1960s to create a stronger urban region in the ‘Great West’; progress has indeed been made towards greater inter-city cooperation. A training and research based on horticulture and landscaping centre was relocated from Rennes to Angers. Likewise, when the Ministry of Education was creating regional higher education consortia of excellence, (the so-called pôles de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur – PRESs) – it created two clusters (Le Mans, Angers and Nantes; and Rennes and Brest respectively), illustrating that municipal institutional structural coherence is not merely a territorial policy question. The LBPM’s mediator role thus remains to be strengthened, and inter-city networking has not accelerated progress in some pressing planning problems (e.g. Nantes airport) (Renard, 2008).

By contrast, G10 has been advocated by local stakeholders since 2007 but remains unapproved. It fills a ‘blank space’ in the MAC map in a region characterized by mainly negative social and economic indicators: shrinking population, unemployment and low qualification levels. It includes Rheims (215 000 inhabitants) and nine other urban areas, totalling 600 000 inhabitants, in 5000 km² of territory spread across two régions (Picardie and Champagne-Ardenne) and three départements. Its challenge is to maintain demographic and economic growth in the absence of metropolization (Geppert, 2009). While its perimeter is a functional territory (e.g. for commuting/shopping), no major projects exist within its boundaries. Attempts have been restricted so far to creating shared perceptions of the G10 framework among local stakeholders and residents. Successful projects to date have been small scale, such as a joint cultural programme published in a local newspaper, a cycling tour or distribution of biodegradable plastic bags. But these efforts have failed to create a collective vision of G10.
Unachievable PM governance?

The two cases illustrate the potential of the PM policy in terms of metropolization and polycentricity, and highlight governance issues that challenge inter-city networking. By questioning the PM projects’ coherence and local political acceptance, it is asked whether a PM is an adequate framework for inter-city networking?

First, the range and availability of stakeholders differs between PMs. Planning agencies play an important facilitation and coordination role, providing studies that legitimate PM frameworks, and offering continuity with previous structures. However, resources vary: the G10 area only has two agencies compared with the five LBPM inter-municipalities having their own, each leading studies and projects on a specific topic.

Second, the tendency towards polarization raises questions about core–periphery relations. Once again, the scale of observation matters. In G10, the outer cities fear domination by the ‘natural’ leader (Rheims municipality). The long-term lack of inter-city cooperation exacerbates problems caused by the low population density (120/km²), creating an obstacle to developing a common vision. By contrast, the five municipalities of LBPM made arrangements to strengthen formal cooperation, reinforcing links between two historical competitor cities, Rennes and Nantes. However, instead of a bilateral PM, a political choice has been made in LBPM to enlarge the framework project to the five main urban areas of the West region, creating a more diffuse network; the association of Angers and Brest (370 km apart) is not functional but political to ensure geographically isolated territories are not excluded. Political solidarity has deliberately been chosen to take precedence over efficiency and functional polarization.
objectives. Local political contingencies make arbitration to reinforce the polarization of selected cores more difficult.

However, conflicts in both LBPM and G10 show that multilevel competition remains important, reinforced by the absence of formal arbitration structures regarding the distribution of responsibilities. This leads to questions over the political commitment of local stakeholders and the conditions for multilevel governance. Indeed, a key issue is achieving stakeholder consensus on priorities and territories of intervention. In G10, a lack of shared vision has led some stakeholders to restrict themselves to a supporting role, while others want to maintain political independence (at the risk of isolating themselves), or to shrink the G10 to a rump of the G3 (the three main cities). Two of the 10 initial urban areas actually decided to withdraw, partly to protest over Rheims’ de facto domination within G10. G10 and LBPM exemplify that stability of the geographical perimeter of the network matters, and even more the continuity of stakeholders’ coalitions.

Finally, membership of a PM is limited to interconnected municipalities, and excludes other administrative entities, such as régions and départements. This accentuates competition between administrative layers and represents an obstacle to cooperation. The President of Champagne-Ardenne Region, for example, opposes G10 because it overlaps two régions (Picardie and Champagne-Ardenne). Inside the PM, inter-city competition persists, and the connection between cities within the network remains unbalanced: in LBPM, ongoing projects are mainly bilateral rather than multilateral.

Conclusion

In France, as in the rest of Europe, inter-city networking is considered the way forward to address metropolization by allowing a partial transfer of competences to facilitate polycentricity. However, legislation by itself is insufficient: by forming new territorial structures, the French PM Act contributed to the opacity of administrative structures, without establishing itself as a legitimate framework for projects. Equally, polycentric development is limited by local political interests and inherited competition between territories, since PM membership does not constrain stakeholders. The next step of the ongoing reforms of French administration will be crucial for PMs’ futures, especially in peripheral regions covered by the two study cases. In fact, the third Act of French decentralization entails creating a dozen of ‘metropolises’, excluding mid-size cities such as Reims and Angers.

PM’s flexibility has led to a variety of outcomes, and widespread acceptance, but also ensured that inter-city networking was secondary to individual inter-municipalities’ interests. In LBPM, for example, an opportunistic political game has created a strategic framework larger than the functional territory, while in G10 there is a gap between stakeholders’ vision and the need for action. Monocentric regional development has been preferred to the risk that polycentricity poses to self-government. The broader administrative ‘layer cake’ also brings conflicting goals and priorities. Since areas in a PM still remain part of other networks, and can also be part of other PMs, opportunistic attitudes prevail.

Thus, while a PM deepens the process of bringing stakeholders together, it is too early to assess its efficiency at political mobilization, and how to use this instrument to create new political territories. Currently, informal bonds between stakeholders are key to an effective PM, leaving it lacking democratic representation. Furthermore, the question arises of whether a PM would be too political to implement inter-city networking.
In terms of overcoming inherited rivalries, there is a need partly to depoliticize PMs by integrating non-institutional stakeholders (local firms and residents). Planning agencies could have more room to manoeuvre for consultations outside their area, and to play a broader role in organizing and consulting more widely among civil society and private stakeholders.

This paper has partially filled a gap in recent literature by given an empirical insight into two PMs; further research could focus on social appropriations and spatial representations of PMs in order to measure its importance among local communities. Likewise, the research also suggests that producing knowledge about PMs need takes place at least partly outside planning agencies to explore them more systematically in a critical perspective.

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