



“Competitive advantage for city regions – the need to create new urban fringe policy”

Summary

A key to creating competitive advantage for European Cities and Regions is to recognise the opportunities and value that the urban fringe area presents through making smarter use of space to enhance sustainable urban development.

With a focus on either urban or rural policy, current European policy does not consider the importance that the urban fringe connection has to the success of cities and regions in Europe.

The Sustainable Urban Fringes (SURF) project recognises that there is an opportunity for the European Union to bridge the gap between urban and rural policy and create new policy which can specifically benefit the development urban fringe areas. Complimenting existing urban and rural policy, this would recognise the characteristics and contribution of these areas to the sustainability and competitiveness of Europe’s Cities and Regions.

The SURF project therefore supports the European Union Regional Policy ‘Cities of Tomorrow’¹ report which states that “a coherent approach to smart, inclusive and green strategies must be adopted so that conflicts and contradictions between these different objectives can be overcome and accomplishment of one objective is not detrimental to meeting others”.

The report continues to stress the importance of “a harmonious development of the city with its surrounding area”

SURF recognises the importance of green spaces to cities and green infrastructure in enabling connectivity and enhancing sustainable urban planning. It is becoming more evident that Europe would benefit from further recognition the level in which cities rely on the ecological services that the surrounding fringe area provide.

In order to advance the Europe 2020 aim for sustainable growth in particular, the Flagship initiative for a ‘Resource efficient Europe’, the SURF Project has identified significant opportunities for cities and regions offered by the urban fringe area, which if recognised could contribute to a higher quality of life in the EU and a more globally competitive European community.

SURF calls upon the Commission to ensure that future policy proposals and Directives unlock possibilities to secure the **economic, environmental and societal** future of these areas.

THE SUSTAINABLE URBAN FRINGE (SURF) PROJECT

The Sustainable Urban Fringe (SURF - www.sustainablefringes.eu) project is part of the Interreg IVB North Sea Programme. The project has revealed examples of opportunities that the urban fringe area can provide to create competitive advantage while positively contributing to the resilience and sustainability of the cities and regions they connect with. The project, which runs from 2009 to 2013, comprises of 13 partners from five countries, involving local and regional authorities, municipalities and universities.

¹ 1. “Cities of Tomorrow – Challenges, Visions, Ways Forward” report – October 2011

The urban fringe can be described as 'the zone between urban and rural areas, where urban and rural functions and qualities meet and interact. This interaction between urban and rural functions and qualities can have both positive results; (synergy between the functions and qualities and added quality) and negative results; (negative interference; loss of quality because of the interaction between different functions).'

SURF has identified that the urban fringe suffers from consistent obstacles, such as identifying ownership of land, issues with connectivity, lack of identity, fragmentation and encroachment.

The benefits of the urban fringe area encompass the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social aspects), which is at the heart of European policy. Through the SURF partnership, practical examples of sustainable development have been analysed, providing a greater understanding of the tools and approaches used to effectively develop and manage urban fringe areas and the obstacles that many urban fringe areas have to overcome.

The key to the competitive advantage offered by the urban fringe lies in their unique structure, flexible possibilities and multi-functional opportunities offered by these areas that can compliment the ambitions of city regions. SURF has analysed examples of cities creating economic opportunities for entrepreneurs, engaging and collaborating with stakeholders to enable projects through community engagement and providing access to the green environment through enhanced connectivity to the city.

SURF has also found that urban fringe development can advance the priority for 'Inclusive growth - a high employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.' through providing opportunities for communities to make positive impacts on their own environments, create local employment, provide access to nature & recreation and support biodiversity. This compliments SURF's findings relating to the success within the project partnership of collaborative activities to enable urban fringe projects through 'soft' governance approaches.

EUROPE 2020

Europe 2020¹ calls for smart, sustainable, inclusive growth. Effective urban fringe management and development can directly advance all three priorities through the efficient use and management of the urban fringe to meet the needs of today's cities but not at the cost of future generations.

The recognition of opportunities presented by urban fringe areas has been discussed at European level for many years: The **European Spatial Development Perspective**² highlighted the necessity to integrate the surrounding countryside in the spatial development strategies of urban areas to improve the efficiency of land use planning.

More recently, **Janez Potocnik**, European Commissioner for the Environment has said: "There are many urban challenges... local authorities... have a key role to play: in the protection of the urban environment; in making a better quality of life for growing urban populations; and in ensuring good urban planning for the cities of tomorrow. Economic growth and urban, green revitalisation are now more important than ever for cities – especially when we all have to look carefully at our finances."³ In terms of the economic climate and the timing of this proposal, it seems that we cannot ignore the opportunity to make the most of the natural resources already at our fingertips when we see the benefits they could bring.

SURF also notes that within The European Commission Sustainable Urban Development Cohesion Policy 2014 – 2020, the wider significance of the environment as a conduit to urban success is highlighted. It states that "the various dimensions of urban life – environmental, economic, social

² European Spatial Development Perspective, 1999 Agreed at the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning

³ Janez Potocnik, European Commissioner for the Environment, Foreword of the Best Practice Catalogue – Award Cycle 2010 & 2011, European Green Capital Award

and cultural – are interwoven and success in urban development can only be achieved through an integrated approach. Measures concerning physical urban renewal must be combined with measures promoting education, economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection.”

Finally, **Dacian Ciolos**, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Affairs has added that “Above all, we need to get the research out of folders and into fields... Put very simply, Nature works in integrated ways. We now have to learn to do the same. We need an integrated approach to sustainability and resource efficiency.”⁴

Therefore the timely conclusion to the SURF project comes at a crucial time in the new and ever challenging economic climate of Europe to provide a flexible solution to increasing the competitiveness of Europe in the global market and providing a route to sustainable cities and regions.

CONCLUSION

The SURF Project has revealed that the opportunities presented by the urban fringe area are multi-functional, flexible to meet the demands of the cities and regions they connect with and offer opportunities for sustainable living for generations to come. SURF therefore stresses the importance of greater recognition in European policy planning of these areas.

The SURF findings prove that in urban fringe areas the environment can be an asset not only for environmental reasoning but can also be a conduit to both economic and social prosperity. Effective guidance to its management can be an enabler for social cohesion, economic growth and sustainable development.

The SURF partnership, consisting of 13 partners from 5 countries calls for:

- Further recognition of the role urban fringe areas can play in the sustainable development of Europe’s city regions through enhancing economic development, enabling social cohesion and monitoring environmental sustainability.
- Commitment from the Commission to integrate the role of urban fringes within future urban policy.
- The development of specific urban fringe policy to support this.



⁴ Dacian Ciolos, European Commissioner responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development, speech made at the Koli Forum, Joensuu, Finland, 15 Sept 2011