

A Comparative Analysis of Polycentric Urban Development in Stockholm and Helsinki Regions: The Case of Urban Planning Organizations.

Etengeneng Johanes Ojong

*Lecturer, Department of Town Planning, National Advanced School of Public Works Yaoundé,
P.O. Box 510 Yaoundé-Cameroon.*

Abstract

Organizations involve in land use planning in cities has played a role in implementing and enhancing polycentric urban development. This is the case of the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki. The objective of this study intends to examine the achievement of polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki region by looking at the role played by their respective planning organizations. This study also has as objective to comparatively analyse polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki via the responds from the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and that of City Planning Office in Helsinki. The methods of data collection consist of primary and secondary sources of information. Semi qualitative structured questions for interviews were design which were use in obtaining the primary information. Interviews were conducted with Urban Planners in the City Planning Office in Helsinki and that of the Office of Regional Planning in Stockholm. In this study, qualitative data analysis such as content analysis techniques were used. The Urban Planners revealed that, it is a good policy to implement polycentric urban development since it had been decided by the Board of Directors which will take quite some time to be done and according to the Planner, the implementation of this concept will prevent urban sprawl, create focal point for public transport, create market for people, initiate building activities and will bring about new developments. More land use development planning is still needed to be dispersed and established to the neighbouring cities and towns of Stockholm and Helsinki for balance regional development.

Keywords: Polycentric Urban Development, Stockholm and Helsinki, Urban Planners, Planning Organizations.

Date of Submission: 22-09-2026

Date of acceptance: 02-10-2026

I. Introduction

Polycentric urban development policy has been a recent debate at the regional, national and international level. Reputable organizations such as the European Union (EU) through European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) have often stressed the notion of polycentricism in many countries in Europe especially in monocentric regions dominated by one city. It has been suggested that polycentric development can be instrumental to reducing regional disparities, see for instance the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CEC, 1999) and the Second Cohesion Report (CEC, 2001). Most often, economic, social and political activities are concentrated in these cities while the surrounding area is devoid of developments, leading to unbalanced regional development. Examples of such cities in Europe include Stockholm in Sweden, Helsinki in Finland and Dublin in Ireland.

Balanced urban or territorial development helps to enhance the notion of polycentric urban development. When different urban centres in a region are economically vibrant and buoyant and economic functions are spread and distributed on the entire urban system within the region to many urban centres, polycentric urban development is achieved. Cities are increasingly embedded into reconfigured urbanized regions, and thereby experience “processes of large-scale restructuring and integration of economic activities, spatial forms, and institutional arrangements” (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021).

Organizations involve in land use planning in cities and or regions has played a role in implementing and enhancing polycentric urban development in order to achieve balance regional development. This is the case of the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki who has been at the fore front in promoting polycentricity in the Stockholm and Helsinki region respectively.

Regionalization can create the necessary kinds of economic, social and physical infrastructure which facilitate and complement the deepening of globalization and this implies a stretching of social, political and economic activities across frontiers such that events, decision and activities in one region of the world can come to have significance for individuals and communities in distant regions of the globe. Concentration of support to

dynamic growth poles would be an engine for growth for the whole country and its regions through regional spillovers (Kaldor, 1970).

This study seeks to address the role of these organizations towards polycentricity through a comparative analysis between Stockholm and Helsinki. It might be presuming that planning institutions in charge of polycentric urban development in Stockholm-Helsinki region has seen the necessity of implementing this concept. Although numerous advantages might be beneficial to the entire region, it is however imagined that certain difficulties might also be encountered during the practicalities of this concept. In this study, both the empirical and theoretical analysis has been utilized to determine the achievements of polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki region. The objective of this study intends to examine the achievement of polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki region by looking at the role played by their respective planning organizations such as Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and that of City Planning Office in Helsinki. This study also has as objective to comparatively analyse polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki via the responds from the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and that of City Planning Office in Helsinki.

II. Theoretical Framework

With the advent of globalisation, the Stockholm region has attracted foreign direct investment making companies located in this region to compete in international markets facing increasing challenges and threats due (OECD Territorial Reviews, 2006). Hence developments in cities and regions will be threatened which might result to low growth rate. In order to cope with these challenges and threats, regions should embark on the implementation of certain principle by dispersing economic, social and environmental aspects of development to many cities in the entire region. Through this, regions will be capable to cope, live and overcome these challenges and threats.

2.1 Polycentric Urban Development

This can be defined as a concept that addresses the distribution of economic and or economically relevant functions over the urban system in such a way that a multitude of urban centres gains significance rather than one or two (Zonneveld, Meijers and Waterhout, 2004). According to the opinion of these authors, distributing developments in the Stockholm and Helsinki region so as to deconcentrate and spread activities from large cities such as Stockholm and Helsinki to other neighbouring towns and cities, is thus necessary as many cities will benefit. Through this, the Stockholm-Helsinki region will achieve regional balance to cope with the challenges and threats pose by globalization. This is relevant in this research project as the Office of the Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki has always played a role to foster developments over the entire region. These aspects will be analysing in the empirical analysis to see the role played by their respective planning institutions towards the achievement of this concept.

2.2 Globalization

It is a process or set of processes which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions-assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact-generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power (Rosenau, 1980). According to Rosenau 1980 goods, services and activities will flow from one region to another which may lead to consequences due to challenges and threats pose. In this study, the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki, has always played a role in implementing polycentric urban development in the entire Stockholm and Helsinki region for balance regional development in order to cope with the challenges and threats generated by globalization. This will also be analysed to get an insight on how Stockholm and Helsinki, through their Regional Planning Office, the role played and the difficulties encountered during the implementation of development planning over the entire region.

2.3 Regional City

This is the repair and revitalization of existing urban and suburban areas with economic, social and environmental structures to establish connections between the city, suburb and the countryside in a region in order to reduce sprawl, inequity, traffic congestion etc (Calthorpe, Fulton and Fishman, 2001). According to the author's view, regional city will foster polycentric urban development from the city to the suburb. The idea of regional city is important in this study project as Stockholm and Helsinki have been striving towards this for balance regional development.

2.4 Territorial Cohesion

This is the economic and social cohesion in a region with the purpose of contributing to harmonious and balance development which brings development opportunities to encourage cooperation and networking among

cities in a region (Faludi, 2005). According to Faludi 2005, the idea of territorial cohesion will bring about collaboration and interrelations among cities for regional balance by reducing disparities among cities and preventing territorial imbalance. The opinion of the author to this study is a relevant as polycentricity cannot be achieve without cooperation and networking among cities.

III. Description of the Case

The Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm, Sweden and City Planning Office in Helsinki, Finland; are planning organizations involve in the implementation of developments in their entire regions with different strategies. But in general, their role is to implement and enhance planning and regional development in their respective regions.

3.1 Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm

The main aim of this institution is to deal with issues of regional planning, traffic planning and regional development at the environmental domain, nature conservation, rural areas and the Stockholm Archipelago; through the monitoring and the initiation of structural matters for the Stockholm County and the region around Lake Malaren as illustrated in Figure 1.

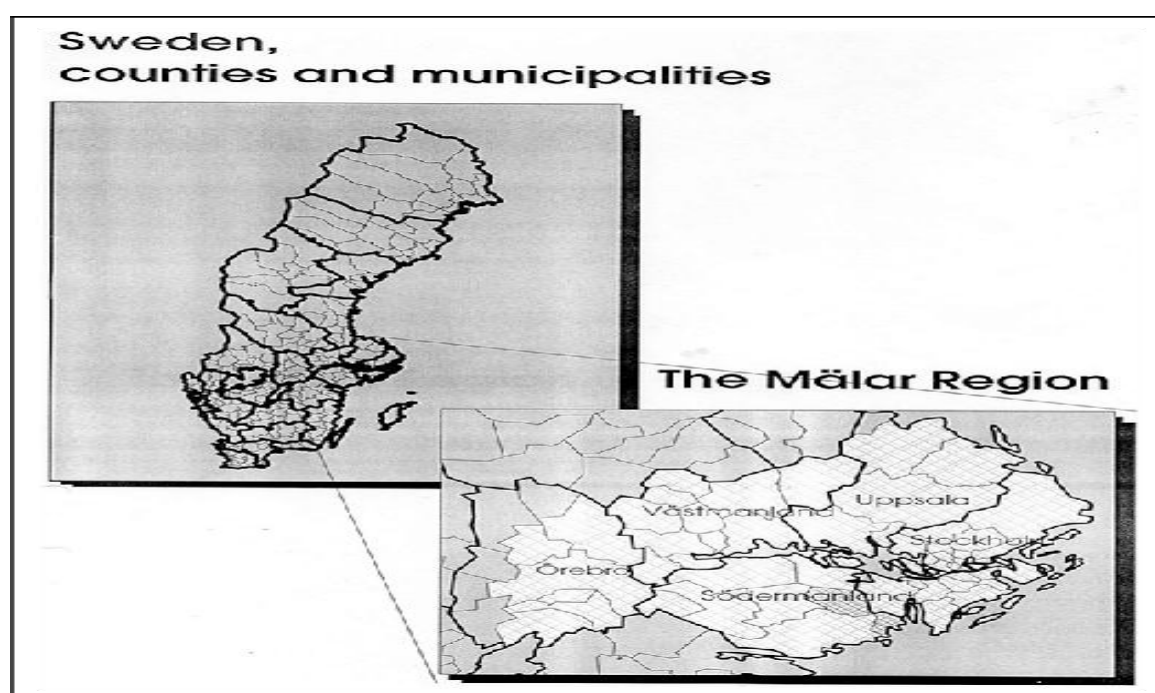


Figure 1: The Mälardalen of Sweden

Source: The Stockholm County Office of Regional Planning and Urban Transportation.

The Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation cooperates with the 26 municipalities of the county, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities, Stockholm County, various Government Authorities such as the County Administrative Board, the Swedish National Road Administration, the Swedish National Rail Administration, Swedish State Railways and other interest groups and educational institutions as well as collaborating internationally with the area of regional development.

Certain strategies have been developed for the development of the Stockholm region. These strategies include increasing the region's capacity, strengthen the innovation environment of the region, expand and hold the region together, develop the structures and systems in the region, internationalise the region; and these strategies will be realised in nine different fields such as renewal and innovation, integration and immigration, competence development and research, housing structure, green and blue structures, transport system land and premises for work places and services, housing market and housing building, technical infrastructure (Regional Development Plan for the Stockholm Region, 2001).

3.2 City Planning Office in Helsinki

The primary purpose of the City Planning Office in Helsinki is responsible for the city's structural and aesthetic development, town planning, as well as the planning and control of traffic due to the fact that, Helsinki is essentially a maritime city with a particularly rich shoreline and different spaces linking the city and water,

enterprise, zero emission areas, the creation of day care centre for children for learning and play, mixing hubs by integrating business, social entrepreneurs, children and leisure (Greater Helsinki Vision 2050, 2007). These hubs might lead to collective housing where individuals share a community life with facilities like common kitchen, reading rooms, common dining room, meeting room, gyms, common television room as well as social production tools such as community building workshops.

IV. Methods

The methods of data collection used in this study consist of primary and secondary sources of information. Semi qualitative structured questions for interviews were design which was use in obtaining the primary information. Interviews were conducted with Urban Planners in the City Planning Office in Helsinki and that of the Office of Regional Planning in Stockholm. Two (2) Planners from the City Planning Office in Helsinki were interviewed separately while two (2) were also interviewed individually from the corresponding Office in Stockholm. The information obtained from all the Urban Planners were essential in directing this study.

Thus, face-to-face surveys data collection method was used via interview as visits were conducted in person to the respondents to obtain information from the Urban Planners in the City Planning Office in Helsinki and that of the Office of Regional Planning in Stockholm. In this study, qualitative data analysis such as content analysis techniques was used to examine the face-to-face interviews conducted with Urban Planners in the City Planning Office in Helsinki and that of the Office of Regional Planning in Stockholm.

Moreover, another data collection method that was used was observation. Some of the land use development planning in Stockholm and Helsinki were observed such as the underground railway transport development in Stockholm, housing development in Stockholm, surface rail network development in Helsinki, the movement of trams along surface rail in Helsinki and as well as the movement of trams alongside vehicles in the city of Helsinki.

The secondary information consists of publication reports from the City Planning Office in Helsinki and Office of Regional Planning in Stockholm. These reports included the Greater Helsinki Vision 2050 and Regional Development Plan 2001 for the Stockholm Region. Some polycentric development literatures were also consulted and vital to this study. Data was also collected through the observation of land use development planning in Stockholm and Helsinki.

4.1 Delimitation

This study mostly focuses on polycentric urban development in the major city of Stockholm and Helsinki. Meanwhile this policy was not examined in other smaller neighbouring towns and cities. The aspect of globalization was not easy to analyse as it might bring about opportunities and benefits, and at the same time, it can bring about challenges and threats. In this study, it was limited to challenges and threats.

V. Presentation of Empirical Analysis

In this study, interviews were conducted with these planning organizations to get an insight of the role played by their respective institution towards the achievement of polycentric development to their entire region. Some observational studies were also carried out to some land use development planning in Stockholm and Helsinki. However, the criteria to comparatively analyse polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki include urban sprawl, growth centres, railway transport network, housing and governance pertaining to development.

5.1 Interviews with Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm

The Urban Planners revealed that, it is a good policy to implement polycentric urban development since it had been decided by the Board of Directors which will take quite some time to be done and according to the Planner, the implementation of this concept will prevent urban sprawl, create focal point for public transport, create market for people, initiate building activities and will bring about new developments.

According to the response of the Urban Planners, some problems were encountered as a result of achieving polycentric urban development such as not much organizational force to promote this policy, problems in finding funds to accomplish this policy, lack of infrastructure such as roads and public transport. But the Planner elaborated that, the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm, has played a great role in solving some of these problems such as supporting implementation by preparing background studies in housing and business, creating special development areas such as the Flemingsberg area for merging research and business together; and a lot of time and funding have been spend in order to accomplish the policy of polycentric development in the Stockholm region as said by the Urban Planner. According to the view of the Planner, with the advent of globalization, the Stockholm region has become a vibrant growth area due to it accessibility and services which has resist global competition.

Comparing polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki, the Urban Planner outlined that Helsinki region has more sprawl than Stockholm and hence, Helsinki is a more compact city with smaller growth centres as compared to Stockholm with larger growth centres because it is two times bigger than Helsinki.

5.2 Interviews with City Planning Office in Helsinki

During the interview, the Urban Planners in Helsinki affirmed that, it is necessary to implement polycentric urban development in the Helsinki region. They maintained that polycentricity will bring about balance and sustainable regional development within the metropolitan region of Helsinki, leading to the creation of economic opportunities to other cities, reduces commuting traffic and enhance cooperation between cities and urban and suburban areas. The Urban Planners outlined a number of advantages gained from polycentric urban development such as efficient traffic connections, balance housing market due to more jobs and services, stimulate the suburban areas and peripheries.

However, the Urban Planners also enumerated some problems encountered such as the slowness to build a rail-based traffic, large city like Helsinki absorbs all development and promote concentration of activities in one city and conflicts between neighbouring cities of not wanting to invest in public transport because they prefer to use cars. In order to solve these problems, the Planners maintained that the cooperation based on partnership and mutual agreement between the central government and the Helsinki Planning Office and between the different planning departments of these cities has been reinforced and extended.

To cope with the threats and challenges pose by globalization, the Urban Planners claimed that Helsinki will become a regional city with new rails networks, new metro, new attractive housing areas, planting of trees in Helsinki and neighbouring towns like Vantaa, new harbour and opening of shoreline.

Comparing Stockholm and Helsinki, the Urban Planners revealed that Stockholm relied on extensive railway traffic which is absent in Helsinki but the Planner echoed that Helsinki relied on trams. As per the view of the Planners, governance is loose in Helsinki and strong by regional bodies in Stockholm which gives opportunities for development in Stockholm region.

5.3 Observation of some Land Use Development Planning in Stockholm and Helsinki

Some observations were carried out in Stockholm and Helsinki on certain land use development planning such as transportation and housing development.

In Stockholm, it was observed that one of the major transport developments is the underground railway with networking links connecting one area or neighbourhood to another as seen in photograph 1.



Photograph 1: Underground Railway Transport in Stockholm.
Source: Field visit (March 2008).

It was also observed that, most of the housing areas in Stockholm have planted trees and the installation of play grounds for children merging together the aspect of economic, social and ecological sustainability in housing development as seen in photograph 2.



Photograph 2: Housing with Trees in Stockholm.
Source: Field visit (March 2008).

It was noticed that, the rail network of these trams alternates with the road network as seen in photograph 3. Meanwhile in Helsinki, the tram or surface railway in one of the main transport systems that convey people from one area of the city to another as seen in photograph 4.



Photograph 3: A view of Surface Rail Network in Helsinki.
Source: Field visit (March 2008).



Photograph 4: Movement of Tram on Surface Rails in Helsinki.
Source: Field visit (March 2008).

It was further observed that these trams move parallel and across vehicles as seen in photograph 5. A situation which might generate traffic congestion in the city of Helsinki.



Photograph 5: Trams moving alongside with Vehicles.
Source: Field visit (March 2008).

Summarily, through the physical observation conducted in Stockholm and Helsinki, it can be revealed that the transport network in terms of railway transport of both cities greatly differs with that of Stockholm more advancing. Stockholm relied on underground railway transport while Helsinki depends on trams or surface railway transport. In terms of housing structures, it can be maintained that Helsinki is still lacking behind in terms of combining the ecological and social aspects into the housing development plan. Most of the housing areas in Helsinki were void of trees and play grounds. While in Stockholm, housing areas are economic, social and environmentally sustaining.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

The objective of this study was the examination of achieving polycentric developments in the Stockholm and Helsinki region through their planning organizations. In order for this to be achieved the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki has played a great role towards the implementation of this policy by dispersing land use developments planning to other cities especially in this era of globalization. Through this, cities will become regional cities capable of competing with other regions for balance regional development.

The polycentric urban development approach, globalization, regional city and territorial cohesion, are all principles that should be implemented in order to cope with the challenges and threats faced by the Stockholm and Helsinki region. Through this idea; the economic, social and environmental aspects of development planning will be dispersed to all cities in the Stockholm and Helsinki region for balance regional development. The Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and City Planning Office in Helsinki, has played a role towards the achievement of polycentric development in their respective regions. This was the purpose of these organizations which was to achieve polycentricity in their various regions. And a number of strategies have been developed by these planning organizations in different fields in order to achieve this aim.

Empirical information from Urban Planners of the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki; all revealed the role played by these organizations towards the achievement of polycentric urban development. Information from observational studies carried out in this study on some land use development planning in Stockholm and Helsinki, has taken note of the achievement of polycentric urban development in Stockholm and Helsinki region.

6.2 Conclusion

Although the policy of polycentric urban development is necessary in these regions in order to achieve balance regional development, studies through observation shows that development is still concentrated in the major cities of Stockholm and Helsinki. The ongoing development area in Flemingsberg, Stockholm merging research and business together; and the Kista area merging research in telecommunication technology and

business could have been imperative if it was established in neighbouring cities and towns like Uppsala and Vasteras. More land use development planning is still needed to be dispersed and established to the neighbouring cities and towns of Stockholm and Helsinki for balance regional development.

The strategies to implement polycentricity in Helsinki mostly focus on economic and social aspects while neglecting the environmental aspect. From the empirical information, Stockholm region is more advanced in land use development planning than the Helsinki region, but both cities has been slow in implementing this policy and one can say that, it remains on policy documents rather than on practical realities. Both the Office of Regional Planning & Urban Transportation in Stockholm and the City Planning Office in Helsinki are envisaging polycentric urban development without practical implementation especially to smaller nearby cities and towns. However, these planning organizations are at the fore front for the implementation of this policy and with the ongoing effort, polycentric urban developments to some extent, have been achieve by their respective planning organizations.

References

- [1]. Calthorpe, P., Fulton, W. and Fishman, R. (2001). *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl*. California, Island Press.
- [2]. Cardoso, R. and Meijers, E. (2021). The long and winding road toward the citification of the region. *Urban Geography*, 42 (1) (2021), pp. 1-20 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1828558>.
- [3]. CEC, (Commission of the European Communities) (1999). *European Spatial Development Perspective: Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the EU*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- [4]. CEC (Commission of the European Communities) (2001). *Unity, Solidarity, Diversity for Europe, Its People and Territory. Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- [5]. Greater Helsinki Vision 2050 (2007). *Internationell idéävling*. Multiprint Oy, 2007 Helsinki.
- [6]. Kaldor, N. (1970) The case for regional policies, *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 17, pp.337-48.
- [7]. OECD Territorial Reviews (2006): Stockholm, Sweden. OECD Publishing, Stockholm.
- [8]. Regional Development Plan for the Stockholm Region (2001). Office of Regional Planning and Urban Transportation. Katarina Tryck, Stockholm.
- [9]. Rosenau, J. (1990). *The Study of Global Interdependence*. London, Francis Pinter.
- [10]. Zonneveld, M., Meijers, E. and Waterhout, B. (2004). *Polycentric Development Policies in Europe: Overview and Debate*.