

URBAN ISSUES IN NATION-STATE AGENDAS. A COMPARISON IN WESTERN EUROPE

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Abstract

Taking into account the context of globalization, glocalization and political rescaling, this paper takes stock of the ways urban issues are processed in the political agendas of Western European states. Using four case studies (France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom), a typology of «national urban policies» is proposed, based on their *explicit vs. implicit* focus on issues spatially defined as urban ones as well as their *direct vs. indirect* character. A comparative perspective is used to consider the resulting types of policies (area-based programmes, mainstream state policies, re-spatialization of local and regional government through institutional reforms, institutional innovation and maintenance of local government) as well as the difficult formulation of integrated and effective policy strategies for cities. Furthermore, the paper takes a view of the uncertain and weak impacts of many of these actions, and proposes a tentative explanation for how and why urban policies enter states' political agendas.

Keywords: urban policy; nation state; political agenda; area based programs; re-spatialization

1. Introduction

Most of the economic and social challenges faced by Western European cities during the last three decades, brought about by the competitive pressures of globalization, glocalization, and the shrinking of the Keynesian welfare state, have been dealt with through policies increasingly made at the local and regional level (Le Galès 2002). However, due to European integration and political rescaling (Brenner 2004), the making of urban policies and the shaping of processes and structures of urban governance takes place within a multilevel institutional environment that is more complex than ever before. The European Union carries out its own policies for cities' competitiveness and social cohesion (Tofarides, 2003), providing local actors with resources and models for action. Moreover, the EU serves as a target for cities' strategies, which are increasingly directed toward international arenas (d'Albergo & Lefèvre 2007). Other

transnational actors like the OECD and several city networks provide local policy makers with cognitive resources and more or less explicit normative pressures. While nation states were once the leading characters of public intervention on urban problems, today the existence of wide room for manoeuvre for national policy makers to address cities' economic and social challenges through their own policy and strategies should not be taken for granted.

The general aim of the paper is to take stock of the actual way urban issues are processed in the political agendas of Western European states. As a point of departure, the paper considers the vast literature concerning urban policies, the role of nation states in the modern era and in the fordist-Keynesian period, subsequent changes brought about by globalization, the rescaling of political power and the relationships between multiple levels of governance. In addition, some (rare) studies more specifically dealing with the topic have been especially considered. In particular, H. Savitch and P. Kantor's (2002) research on cities' development strategies views national policies as being one of several independent variables that may explain a city's strategy orientation (social vs. market oriented). European states have been helping their cities with «mainstream policies», fiscal regulation aimed at reducing local policies' dependence on the territorial economy, and ad hoc programs. This has made it easier for local governments to bargain with mobile capital without embarking on a «race to the bottom» in terms of socially costly comparative advantages. The other alternative would run the risk of formulating «cookie cutter» national policies, neglecting differences between cities and their need for autonomy.

A prominent share of the state of knowledge can be located in the studies conducted by L. Van den Berg et al. (1998; 2007), who systematically compared the then 15 European member states' «national policy responses to urban challenges», proposing the first classification and explanation of governments' attitudes and actions. These attitudes and actions would result in three possible conditions: (i) the making of «explicit» urban policies; (ii) a growing focus on urban issues; (iii) a lack of both national urban policies and attention to cities. Governments might commit themselves (or not) to the institutional empowerment of cities, the inducement of public-public and public-private partnerships, and the integration of sector-based policies by taking on urban social and development problems through area-based programs as well as tackling territorial fragmentation and infra-regional competition. The actual choice between different policy orientations and instruments would depend on the characteristics of the urban national system, the arrangement of institutions

and public finance, the kind of urban crisis, and «renaissance» processes-aspects which are dissimilar among European cities .

The latter studies provide a categorization of European states' experiences, even though similarities and differences could be put within a more comprehensive and systematic framework. In particular, the circumstances under which the different types of policy are carried out (or not) can be systematized, taking also into account other aspects and variables. Moreover, supplementary questions can be asked about the existence of clear and coherent political strategies at the national level for dealing with urban challenges, the nature of such strategies, and the extent to which they are convergent or divergent.

With the aim of advancing this line of inquiry, a comparative study has been conducted using four case studies from Western Europe (France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom) based on the existent literature, official documents and web sites. The paper concisely presents the product of this analysis, resulting in a rather sceptical conclusion about the existence of coherent national policy strategies; it finds that even within a single country, various types of national urban policies, not necessarily consistent with each other, coexist. Their main features are presented in section 2. On the whole, institutionalized assessment procedures and academic research focusing on the outputs and outcomes of these policies (both considered in section 3), point out more limitations than successes. This evaluation leads to a question concerning the protraction of such policies, even in the presence of disappointing consequences. The apparent contradiction between the investment of political and material resources and such allegedly unsatisfactory results offers an opportunity for further analysis which would benefit from field research. For the moment, a tentative and hypothetical explanation, with an outlook for subsequent empirical testing, is proposed in section 4, based on the ways the four identified types of national urban policy enter the national political agendas. This should also help ascertain the main reasons for convergence and divergence among the analyzed national experiences.

2. A typology of national urban policies

In order to address urban issues, national governments perform a variety of actions, which can be classified into a policy typology based on two variables. When political attention for urban issues gives rise to national decisions, policy makers can choose between two principal alternatives: political responses can be either *explicit* or *implicit* and the resulting

policies may have either *direct* or *indirect* effects on cities. The resulting typology of policies is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1 – A typology of national urban policies

	Explicit (with an urban spatial focus)	Implicit (Without an urban spatial focus)
<p>Direct (aimed at directly tackling urban challenges)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ area-based programmes - for economic growth (UK, France) - for social inclusion (UK, France, Germany) - for security (UK, France) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ mainstream policies (all the four countries)
<p>Indirect (aiming at providing others with conditions for tackling urban challenges)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ policies for re-spatialization of urban (local) government (UK, France) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ policies for institutional innovation: - decentralization of power and multilevel relationships (UK, France, Spain) - reforms of local government (UK, Spain) - reforms of structures and processes of public action (UK, France)

State policies are *explicitly* urban when they are designed and implemented on the basis of an evident and prominent territorial focus of an urban nature. In such cases, an urban target is highly detectable in the public debate and in the official documents of the policy. It provides the spatial criterion through which problems to be dealt with are identified and circumscribed. Additionally, it provides a reference through which decision makers can choose from existing menus the policy recipes and instruments that are to be used. State policies are only *implicitly* urban when actions, even those which produce consequences on the social and economic lives of cities, are employed without such a specific spatial criterion, so that their impacts on an urban scale are incidental (Harding 2007, 62).

National urban policies are to be considered *direct* when state actions confront causes or consequences of urban challenges without the interposition of other actors- namely, infra-national governments. Policies are *indirect* when the decision makers’ main aim is to provide local actors with conditions and resources (political, of legitimisation, instrumental, financial, cognitive) for taking on urban challenges through their own policies. Explicit urban policies and institutional innovation measures are

briefly sketched out below, while the wide range of mainstream (*directly* but only *implicitly* urban) policies cannot be considered here.

- The «explicit and direct» urban policies

The explicit and direct national urban policies consist of area-based programs addressing either economic problems- mostly concerning wider urban areas, or social problems- concerning narrower zones. Such programs are carried out in France, UK and Germany, but are not present in Spain. As a result of the homogenizing effect of the European Union's urban policy (epitomized by the urban Initiative), these programs fall under the category of «urban development programs» (De Decker et. al 2003). They share several common elements across different countries, such as:

- a target territorially circumscribed to those areas where economic or social problems or shortfalls arise (the former typically concerning agglomerations or city-regions; the latter concerning the inner cities in the UK and the Zones Urbaines Sensibles in the French banlieues);
- a smaller financial size and duration than mainstream state policies, therefore making a comparatively minor impact. On the other hand, they are more resilient than mainstream state policies. Furthermore, they are able to generate potential for change and for learning from past experiences. In France and the UK, this has led to several generations of similar (but not equivalent) interventions (see boxes);
- a tendency to hypertrophy, sometimes due to the coexistence of multi-year initiatives launched by former and new governments, with the consequent possible coexistence of actions that refer to different strategies;
- a model of action usually consisting of major decisions made at the national level, procedures of competitive bidding between cities in order to get grants from the central government, implementation needing cooperation with the local level, and procedures of impact assessment.

- Programs addressing economic concerns

State initiatives aimed to foster economic development can be mostly found in the UK, and to a lesser extent in France, where up until the second half of the 1990s, urban areas' economic competitiveness was not a priority of national policies (Lefèvre 2007, 151). In Germany, urban competitiveness is a local and regional concern rather than national one. This is also the case in Spain, where the national government carries out policies aiming to foster development, especially in the field of R&D and infrastructures, which concern the national territory as a whole and do not specifically focus on urban areas.

United Kingdom

Since the '80s urban decline was confronted through actions aimed towards economic regeneration (Cochrane 2007) and competitiveness, with programs such as the *Urban Program* (1981) and *City Challenge* (1992). After the political change in 1997, the government no longer considers cities to be merely problematic, but also considers them to be economic and social opportunities. The main programs carried out in the New Labour era, complementing urban regeneration and flagship projects are:

- *Regional Economic Strategies* (1998)
- *Local Enterprise Growth Initiative* (2005)
- *World class skills* (2007)
- *City Strategy Pathfinders* (2007)

France

Only recently have initiatives for the economic development of French cities been launched. They are aimed at improving competitive advantages and addressing less developed areas' needs. The most important are:

- *Pôles de compétitivité* (2004)
- *Appel à coopération métropolitaine* (2004)
- *Grand Paris* project (2008)

National programs for cities' growth in the UK and France complement the *indirect* measures aimed at reducing the administrative fragmentation (including the power of levying taxes) of urban regions and metropolitan areas (see below).

Governmental actions for the urban economies are to be considered in the light of the policy alternative between efforts aimed at fostering the competitiveness of single cities or city-regions vs. the territorial rebalancing of a country's development (Brenner 2004). In some of the analyzed countries, policy discourses (Rein & Schön, 1993) have explicitly focused on this alternative. Since the '60s, The «Paris and the desert of France» question has been dealt with through the *Politique des métropoles d'équilibre*. It is still a controversial issue, as shown by the dispute over the establishment of a governmental unit for the Capital region and a project for the development of Paris region in 2008. In the UK, the policies carried out by the *Regional Development Agencies* have taken into account the competitive differences among cities, but this has not brought the issue of balanced territorial development to the fore. In Germany, the new East/West cleavage gave rise to an orientation of the Federal Economic Policy, legitimated by the Constitution, in which the rebalancing between competitive and non-competitive areas is a primary objective. As such, the role of the nation state counterbalances a growing competitiveness among German cities and urban regions (Mäding 2006). However, this creates tension as far as the overall policy frame of territorial development is

concerned. In Spanish mainstream policies, territorial balance is usually part of policy discourses agreed on by national and regional actors.

- *Programs addressing social and security concerns*

Area-based programs with social goals allocate additional and compensative resources to particularly needy urban areas (Harding 2007, 63). They aim to improve social connectedness and social order by reducing the spatial concentration of poverty, unemployment, deprived social/ethnic groups and weak social capital,. Thus, within these programs the «equivocal principle» of social cohesion can be interpreted differently (Le Galès 2007, 225).

The spatial polarization of social disease (brought also about by gentrification and selective sub-urbanization) is addressed through spatially differentiated and narrow measures (van den Berg et al. 2007, 401). These measures reveal a direct connection with the European URBAN Initiative, which utilized many aspects of the national programs and in turn, later provided the national programs with stronger legitimization and cognitive resources. Such initiatives can be found in the UK, in France, and to a lesser extent, in Germany.

United Kingdom

In the New Labour era, several programs were carried out in order to tackle the urban social problems caused by economic crisis and to compensate for the negative social effects of previous growth-oriented interventions, mainly in England and Wales. Even though some of the changes had impacted the area-based economic programs under the J. Major's conservative leadership (1990-1997) the initiatives aimed at simultaneously confronting the economic, social, ethnic and safety-related problems witnessed to a major change in the policy frame. This happened after the political change of 1997, when social cohesion and urban safety were also interpreted as resources for improving cities' economic competitiveness and attractiveness (Hemerijck 2002). The most important programs are:

- *New Deal for Communities* (1998)
- *New Deal for Young People, New Deal for 25 plus, New Deal for 50 plus, New Deal for Disabled, New Deal for Lone Parents, Employment ad Support Allowance* (1998 onward)
- *Employment zones* (2000)
- *Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy* (2001)
- *Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders* (2001)
- *Sustainable Communities Plan* (2003)
- *Working Communities Fund* (2007)

France

The *Politique de la ville* is an enduring policy launched in the early '80s as a response to the spatial concentration of social deprivation in the peripheral areas of big cities and its consequences in terms of individual and collective deviant behaviour. Within it, several generations of programs have been carried out. Some attempt to connect social cohesion, *mixité sociale*, and urban development. Others include alternating

strategies, focusing either on the improvement of opportunities for people or on the regeneration of places. Recent programs bring concerns of social control to the fore. The most important programs and measures are:

- *Développement social des quartiers* (1981)
- *Développement social urbain* (with *contrats de ville*) (1988)
- Establishment of the *Ministère de la ville* (plus a *Comité interministériel des villes*, a *Délégation interministérielle à la ville* and a *Conseil national des villes*);
- *Loi d'orientation pour la ville* (1991)
- *Grands Projets Urbains* (1992)
- *Pacte de Relance pour la Ville (zonage)* (1996)
- *Grand Projets de Ville and Opérations de Renouvellement Urbain* (1999)
- *Loi Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbains* (2000)
- *Loi d'Orientation et de Programmation pour la Ville et la Rénovation Urbaine (Borloo)* (2003)
- *Program National de Rénovation urbaine* and establishment of the *Agence nationale de la rénovation urbaine* (2003)
- Establishment of the *Délégation Interministérielle à l'Aménagement et à la Compétitivité des Territoires*, taking over the former *Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale* (2006)
- Launch of the *Contrats Urbains de Cohésion Sociale* (2006)
- *Espoir Banlieues* (2008)

Germany

Since the '90s, territorial and urban issues have taken on a growing importance in the political agenda. This importance results from the need to manage the spatial and social effects of the national reunification in the Länder of the former DDR (a great number of abandoned houses, a consequent drop in house prices and unplanned suburbanization), as well as the deindustrialization affecting the Western cities. The key programs which carry out both «material» and «non material» measures addressing urban deprivation are:

- *Die Soziale Stadt* (Socially Integrative City) (1996)
- *Stadtumbau Ost* (2002)
- *Stadtumbau West* (2004)

French and UK socially-focused urban programs share a «security drift», particularly evident when safety-targeted area-based measures and instruments are launched, like the *Contrats Locaux de Sécurité* and the *Conseil local de Sécurité et de Prévention de la Délinquance*. In the UK, after the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) some «community based» initiatives involving the private and voluntary sectors have also been implemented, such as *Neighbourhood Watch* (1982), *Neighbourhood Wardens Scheme* (2000) and *Street Crime Initiative* (2002). These *Community Safety Strategies* use instruments such as the *Child Curfews*, the *Anti Social Behaviour Orders* the *Respect Action Plan*, the *English Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships*, the *Local Area Agreements* and the *Safer and Stronger Communities Fund*.

• The «indirectly urban» policies

Explicit and indirect urban policies consist of measures of re-spatialisation of infra-national government. They mostly aim to reduce institutional fragmentation, in particular where sub-urbanization processes have occurred. According to an underlying and rather shared belief that infra-urban competition would lead to zero-sum games (Harding 2007, 50) these policies induce cooperation at the level of urban regions, agglomeration, and metropolitan areas¹. They would also bring about forms of regionalism and/or metropolitan governance, in which the territory of co-ordinated policies should coincide with economic rather than simply administrative boundaries (Hutton 2007, 146). Important measures of this type were passed:

- in France (from 1999): Mostly found among measures for co-operation between municipalities in the dimension of agglomeration and urban region (establishment of *communautés d'agglomération* and *communautés urbaines*, with competences in the fields of economic development and territorial planning as well as fiscal powers). They have been used in order to direct local actions within large urban areas towards territorial solidarity and to provide the national government with suitable partners for the implementation of agglomeration projects funded through intergovernmental contracts (Lefèvre 2007, 157);
- in the UK (from 1998): an attempt at regionalization is being carried out through the establishment of nine *Regional Development Agencies* and eight *Regional Assemblies* (plus the *Greater London Authority*). The greater aim is to pursue a governmental *Regional Economic Strategy*, whose actions are also aimed at the urban dimension. Moreover, the need for policies more explicitly and specifically addressing the dimension of urban region is gaining attention in the UK debate (ODPM, 2006b).

In the analysed period, such measures were substantially absent from the German and Spanish agendas, because of the already powerful «meso» levels of government (*Länder* and *Comunidades Autonomas*), which make the issue of re-spatializing local government to enter the national agenda a more difficult one.

¹ The way spatial definitions such as urban region, metropolitan area, agglomeration are used by policy maker, is differentiated, especially in France and the UK.

In the making of national urban policies, innovation measures (*indirect* and *implicit*) concern the decentralization of power, the strengthening of local political leadership (UK, Spain) and the menus of tools (especially legal) to be used in the relationship between public, private and social actors (UK, France, Spain). In Spain, the prevailing national policy affecting urban areas comprises the reinforcement of great cities' leadership (*Ley de grandes ciudades* of 2003), the *Pacto local*, launched in 1999 and aimed at making the devolvement of power from the powerful *Comunidades* to the municipalities easier, as well as the mainstream policies. As decentralization cannot be based on formal national authority, the government has provided regional and local authorities with a regulated framework for negotiating the actual balance of power in governing Spanish cities and implementing urban policies.

Such *indirect* and *implicit* urban policies can also be found in France and the UK, where different measures of decentralization have been passed, and structures and processes of local government and governance have been object of reforms. These types of measures substantiate the well-known «downscaling» processes of state authority and the so-called «principle of vertical subsidiarity», providing the institutional conditions for making local policy agendas within a country potentially different from one another. These paths of decentralization seem ambiguous or unstable because something similar to a «shadow of hierarchy» is still present. In the UK, centralized assessment procedures counterbalance the decentralization process, even though recent developments² concerning local government reveal the government's more resolute decentralizing attitude. The French decentralization process, which began in the early '80s and later culminated in a constitutional reform (2003), has resulted in an inter-institutional system based on bargaining between central and infra-national authorities. These authorities are not, however, linked to each other by hierarchical ties, as regionalism without legislative power is not equivalent to other countries' devolution processes.

Through these *indirect* measures of urban policy, local authorities are provided with new territorial compass, and/or more power, and/or models of cooperation with civil society (governance and participatory instruments). To some extent, all of these measures support the theory which contends that political rescaling is connected to a spatially selective

² Such as the 2006 *White Book Strong and Prosperous Communities*; the management of the lately launched area-based program *Working Communities Fund* and the *Area-based Grants*, leaving more space for local discretion

strategy through which nation states face the challenges of globalization. Providing a country's urban areas with such institutional resources should empower them and make it easier for them to effectively carry out competitive strategies at the most appropriate territorial level. An implication to be considered is that through such measures, national policies also often bring in constraints and implicitly indicate goals for local authorities' action (Navarro Yanez et al. 2008, 533).

3. Weak strategies and limited outcomes, but enduring policies: some questions for research

In recent decades, the governments of France, Germany, Spain and the UK have faced urban challenges through somewhat similar and somewhat different courses of action. In each country, the presence of urban issues in the national agenda has brought about the adoption of a specific mix of *explicit*, *implicit*, *direct* and *indirect* measures. Does this combination resemble the ideal type of an integrated, coherent and long lasting strategy, making reference to an unambiguous policy frame ³?

A policy strategy can be ideal-typically defined as a recipe for attaining goals or objectives, usually through the comparison of two or more options (each implying different courses of actions, instruments, amounts and kinds of resources, etc.). In complex political systems, a single actor rarely formulates such a strategy. In order for a coherent strategy to emerge in the field of urban policy, the preferences of many actors should converge. This process proves to be difficult, as the involved actors are active in different policy sub-fields and at different territorial levels. They also potentially represent conflicting interests and seek to maximize the attainment of their own political objectives and benefits in conditions of bounded rationality, using different frames for defining problems to be addressed and linking them to solutions. The result should then represent a common and coherent agenda and concerted patterns of action. Internal institutional frameworks and exogenous normative pressures provide rules of appropriateness that should help to integrate such a variety of preferences and frames.

³ A policy frame corresponds to the beliefs, norms and «theory-in-use», based on values and knowledge, through which policy problems, goals and instruments are defined. It is the frame institutional actors use to construct the problem of a specific policy situation, by selecting, organizing, and making sense of available information (Schon & Rein 1993; 1994). Thus, framing is a process underpinning the public debates that end in decisions. On a national scale, the nature of the prevailing policy frame may explain the specificity of the adopted goals and instruments.

The presence of *explicit* urban national policies (being them *direct* or *indirect*), which can be found in France, UK and to some extent in Germany, seems to be an initial condition for speaking about a national strategy. Moreover, the presence (or not) of governmental units dedicated to urban issues is an indicator of urban issues' political importance, and is also a necessary condition for the existence of a government's urban strategy. Such units exist in France (*Ministère de la ville* since 1990), UK (*Department for Communities and Local Government – DCLG* for social programs since 2006, when it took over the *Office of Deputy Prime Minister*) and Germany (two departments within the *Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau und Stadtentwicklung* (the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs)). No similar unit exists in Spain, as there is no existing policy which explicitly concerns urban issues.

These two indicators prove to be consistent with one another. But even where such conditions are satisfied, the national policies that address urban challenges result from a summation of the above-listed heterogeneous programs, interventions and measures. Their goals are not only shifting over time, but sometimes also appear difficult to reconcile with one another. Under such circumstances, it would be hard to demonstrate the existence of a national strategy for cities which actually resembles the ideal type of a comprehensive and coherent policy strategy. This makes it difficult to identify whether overall strategic goals have been achieved or not. Instead, it is easier to ascertain which is the alleged degree of success of each type of national measure aimed to cope with urban challenges. This section provides a concise overview of how such state interventions have been evaluated within the institutionalized assessment procedures and by the scientific literature. Even though positions are differentiated, on the whole sceptical opinions do prevail. Therefore, a question can be put forward regarding the explanations for the enduring investments of financial, administrative and political resources.

- *Area-based-programs with economic goals*

The assessments of UK economic area-based programs⁴ emphasize both successful and unsuccessful impacts (ODPM 2006a). However, according to more independent analyses, the cities reached by the interventions would not have caught up with the most successful urban areas, or might have worsened their relative position (Boddy & Parkinson, 2004; Leunig & Swaffield, 2007).

⁴ French economic programs have been too recently implemented to be evaluated.

- *Area-based programs with social goals*

Opinions on the impacts of socially- focused programs are polarized into rather conflicting positions. According to the assessments provided by central agencies, impacts are quite positive in Germany and the UK. The *Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy* and the programs for urban safety are rather successful (HM Treasury, DBERR, DCLG, 2007; Tilley, 2002), while the evaluations of the *New Deal for Communities* (Lawless 2006), *Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders* (Audit Commission 2006) and *Neighbourhood Management* programs are more ambivalent (DCLG & DWP 2007). On the whole, German area-based programs should be considered successful , thanks in part to the resilience provided by their flexible governance, negotiated (between the *Länder* and the *Bund*) and regulated since 1971 by the *Städtebauförderungsgesetzes Act*.

Independent analyses are generally more critical, emphasizing the amount of difficulty with which social programs achieve the stated goals. The analysts also emphasize that innovation is more closely connected to programs' approach and instruments, especially concerning the methods of involvement of targeted populations into policy making (Donzelot & Estebe 1996; Cole e Nevin 2004), than actual outputs and outcomes. In particular, the following problematic aspects have been pointed out:

- ineffectual impacts on social polarization (Cochrane 2007; Leunig & Swaffield 2007), measured through indicators such as unemployment, criminality, health, community involvement, etc. These create a lack of empowerment of the poorest communities (Gough 2002, 71), if not unwanted effects of further stigmatization (Behar 1999) and reproduction of social and power divide. These impacts are partly ascribed to confusion and inconstancy in policy frames and strategies: in Germany the flexibility left for implementation would render policy goals too vague and would subject policies to the tensions between public and private interests (Aehnelt 2007), with «material» eventually prevailing on «immaterial» interventions (Becker et. al 2002). In the *Politique de la ville*, «place strategy» and «people strategy» have been either coexisting or alternating over time. It also contains incompatible goals, such as the improvement of living conditions in deprived areas and incentives for inhabitants to leave. In both the UK and in France, the goal of social mix (*mixité sociale*) in deprived neighbourhoods would be not only difficult to achieve (Vranken, 2005) but also ambiguous in itself (Epstein & Kirzbaum 2006). When such a policy frame prevails, the resulting actions may easily produce unwanted or unexpected effects, such as gentrification (Oberti 2006, 193). If social

exclusion and polarization are to be considered inherent to the structure of urban societies under the present economic conditions, well-equipped mainstream policies would be more effective than area-based programs (Andersson & Musterd 2005), as long as they become more spatialized (Friedmann 2007);

- inadequacy of programs' scale. Until the end of the 90s' the *politique de la ville* (Sueur 1998) was of a scale so small that it produced fragmented actions (Lefèvre 2007, 54). The impacts were also contradictory, as the «positive discrimination» justifying the targeting of specific zones, combined with the planning approach based on wider agglomerations, put the *Politique de la ville* at risk of becoming a sort of unspecific and ordinary territorial policy (Cour des Comptes 2002). Additionally, national area-based programs were often out of sync with mainstream policies;
- disappointment for the actual functioning of policy design and instruments. In the case of the French *contrats*, there was too much fragmentation and overlapping of actions, as well as competition among programs, even contradicting one another (Jones & Ward 2002). This negatively affected their management in both France and the UK. The latter urban policies have been considered «a 'mille feuilles' made of the sedimentation of programs, policy instruments, special programs, using all sorts of policy instruments and targets» (Le Galès, 2007, 239), if not a «bowl of spaghetti» (Johnstone & Whitehead 2004, 4).

- *Indirect urban policies: consequences of institutional change*

Policies of institutional re-spatialization, decentralization and innovation are rarely subject to assessment procedures, but in the academic debate critical opinions do emerge. In particular, without a strong meso-government (like the German or Spanish ones), the building of political territories and premises of effective territorial policies turn out to be, at the very least, uncertain. According to the «Rapport Dallier» (Sénat 2008), French local actors would have used intercommunal cooperation with opportunistic and defensive purposes, while in metropolitan areas, the territorial extension of the *communautés urbaines* would not be sizeable. Notwithstanding the ongoing debate on the centralized nature of the French state, decentralization would have brought about the formation of new infranational policy arenas, which are also vital for economic interests (Lefèvre 2002, 44). However, this does not automatically result in more effective policy-making.

Institutional reforms, together with the implementation of national urban programs, would have brought about higher fragmentation in the UK, due to the proliferation of institutions, organizations and subsequent overlapping roles (Parkinson 2007; Johnstone & Whitehead 2004). Although regional agencies' commitments to development have had a pronounced focus on urban areas, particularly through urban regeneration, the impact of their actions on economic performances on a city-region scale would still be weak (LGA, 2007). Notwithstanding political rhetoric, UK devolution and decentralization have not yet produced a decentralized system; they have co-existed with centralization pressures exerted through formal and informal procedures (Le Galès 2004) and the imposition by central rules or incentives of models such as the public-private partnership. Such a co-existence of decentralization and centralization is visible in both mainstream policies and the decision making of area-based programs, controlled by central government through funding and official assessment systems. Further decentralization is expected in the future from both a general governmental policy (Lyons 2007) implementing the *Strong and prosperous communities* White Book of 2006, and a new course introduced into the area-based programs by the *Working Neighbourhoods Fund* (2007).

The Spanish policy is aimed at providing local decision makers with new instruments and fostering decentralization from regional to local authorities. To this end, legal instruments have been mainly used. Their effectiveness largely depends on the distribution and actual use of informal power resources among national, regional and local actors, so that the outcomes are differentiated and not controlled by central government.

In general, it appears difficult to co-ordinate the instruments of re-spatialisation (newly established institutions or organizations) with decentralization. Nor has it been easy to align the resulting institutional arrangements with the goals of competitiveness at the city-region level. At the same time, local actors are not always coherent with the orthodox rhetoric of regional cooperation, both in France and in the UK. Analysing other contexts, P. Kantor (2008) found that local actors are keen to use political and extra-institutional resources, resulting in systems of mutual adjustment and «coordination», in order to make up for institutional arrangements for «co-operation» at the city-region level that are not working or are difficult to establish. It would be worthwhile to empirically test his conclusions in our four countries, as well .

Despite the widespread rhetoric on vertical and horizontal integration of public policies, the four kinds of national urban policies are at risk of

fragmentation and low integration to each other. Even where dedicated governmental units do exist, they hardly seem able to coordinate the different types of policy; some of them are under control of other central political and administrative units, whose missions and visions may differ from one another. The UK government first tried to address this issue through the *Planning Policy Guidance* for the *Urban Renaissance* program as well as the *Public Service Agreements* adopted in 1998. Again in 2007, the latter program was adopted in the UK in order to coordinate sector policies, this time adding an urban focus. Success is rare, as mainstream policies are, for the most part, still carried out without (urban) spatial targets and effective coordination with area-based programs. Not even the already institutionalized *Politique de la ville* appears to be well coordinated either with mainstream development policies (Sueur 1998; Cour des comptes 2002) or with the reforms aiming at re-spatializing urban and/or regional governance. The spatial extension of the *établissements publics de coopération intercommunale* rarely corresponds to that used for the management of area-based programs (DIV, 2007). Furthermore, the zones within an *agglomération* may be affected by the *Politique*, while the *solidarité intercommunale* is recognized outside of this policy. In the UK, a central organizational solution has been found in order to deal with such problems. The *DCLG* is in charge of many area-based programs as well as institutional issues concerning local government.

Finally, integration and consistency between economic and social area-based programs cannot be taken for granted, despite the widespread rhetoric about the need to harmonize goals and actions for competitiveness and social cohesion. Even when this harmonization is actively pursued (DCLG & DWP, 2007), results would be doubtful (Le Galès 2007).

Thus, not only does the treatment of urban issues at the national level generate a combination of different types of policies (*implicit, explicit, direct, indirect*), but the more inconsistencies among them there are, the more difficult it is for a coherent and long lasting policy strategy at the national level to emerge. Moreover, the gaps between policy statements and the controversial results also raise questions about the motivations of policy entrepreneurs' and the investment of material and non-material resources in such policies, (especially for carrying out the *explicit* and *direct* urban policies, which require a lot more resources). These questions are presented and tentatively answered in section 4.

4. Convergence and divergence among states' agendas. A tentative explanation

Taking into consideration the gaps and inconsistencies mentioned above, two questions regarding convergence and divergence among states' agendas emerge: (i) What are the factors that could explain convergence and divergence in the ways national governments take on urban issues as a field of political action and produce specific combinations of the aforementioned policy types? Even though answering such a question was not one of the initial aims of this study, some evidence has emerged, which may also be useful for answering a second question: (ii) How to explain persistent policy actions in presence of limited outcomes, especially as far as *explicit* and *direct* urban policies are concerned? The answers are connected to each other, as both take into consideration the importance of the agenda setting of urban policies. (i) As shown above, national urban policy strategies in the ideal-typical meaning hardly emerge, thus they are hardly comparable. Convergence and/or divergence among urban agendas essentially regard on the one hand the «national combinations» (and/or hybridization) of the four types of policy exposed in section 2, and on the other hand the policy frames of area-based programs and institutional reforms (re-spatialization and decentralization). Even though a plurality of manifest reasons for dealing with urban issues can be observed (see below), economic concerns provide an underlying policy frame for state actions also addressing the social problems of UK cities. This also happened when the theme of security came into vogue within policy discourses. . On the whole, economic and social concerns seem to be, more balanced in France, even though such a balance results more from alternating governments' political priorities than from a constantly equilibrated policy frame. In Germany, urban policies carried out at the national level are weaker but are apparently more balanced. However, a better test of the overall coherence and specific balance should include Länder policies and their role in the making of the national policy.

Certainly, there are important variables that may significantly explain the kind of adopted policies, as well as their frames: the spatial, demographic, economic and social nature of national urban systems; the structural and contingent natures of urban economies; and the types of external and internal urban challenges . Nevertheless, it does not seem possible to deduce from such «objective data» which policy problem will enter a national agenda, its degree of priority, its definition and underlying frame, the centralized or decentralized governance of its course of action or, the adopted instruments. This is because some of the external pressures are

similar in the four countries, and also because all of the mentioned conditions must however be perceived and interpreted by real actors in order for urban issues to enter and be processed within political agendas,

According to a narrower conception, a policy agenda is made up of prospective or actual programs and measures, thus it mainly refers to policy solutions. According to a wider conception, a political agenda comprises problems that, for various reasons and under the pressure of different forces, should be dealt with by governments, be they «new» issues or those already addressed through existing policies. The process by which a «problems-agenda» becomes a «solutions-agenda» is of course fundamental, as policy frames and strategies are shaped within it. In the case of national urban policies, this process depends on various factors. One group of factors predicts «whether» and «to what extent» a government can carry out its own political actions for cities (producing *direct* vs. *indirect* urban policies). Other factors influence «which» actions (*explicit* vs. *implicit* policies) a government will perform, and «how» (according to which policy frame and with which goals and instruments).

The first factor is to be essentially found in (a) the «rules of the game» established by constitutional orders, while the latter factors are to be found in (b) the intensity and kind of political attention through which urban problems are «constructed» and (c) the role of politics and political change. The effects of all⁵ of these factors are illustrated in figure n. 2.

(a) The *rules of the game* especially concern the formal and informal intergovernmental relations within *unitary vs. federal* and *centralized vs. decentralized* regimes. This institutional structure is determined by «who can do what», thus to what extent a national government can use formal authority resources (in reforming local government and governance), and/or directly manage programs involving public expenditure for local purposes. This possibility is higher in unitary and centralized systems (such as France and the UK), where mainstream policies also leave less space for local authorities, and lower in federal or «quasi-federal» states (like Germany and Spain), where urban policies mainly «belong» to the «meso» and lower political levels. The German area-based programs have been developed with a strong level of participation of the *Länder*, who are also

⁵ A fourth factor affecting the «how» should also be considered. It consists of the cognitive frameworks and the structures of incentives provided by transnational actors such as the OECD and the European Union, through the Eu urban policy. This is not considered here because of limited space and the lower impact on variance among states' agendas.

involved in the setting of the national agenda and whose power over local government codes explains the lack of (*indirect*) institutional innovation in the national agenda.

In all countries, normative influence on the making of local policies is also exerted by governments through «soft» resources which provide knowledge, innovation and benchmark opportunities. Additionally, they provide a lesson also drawn from the EU urban policy.

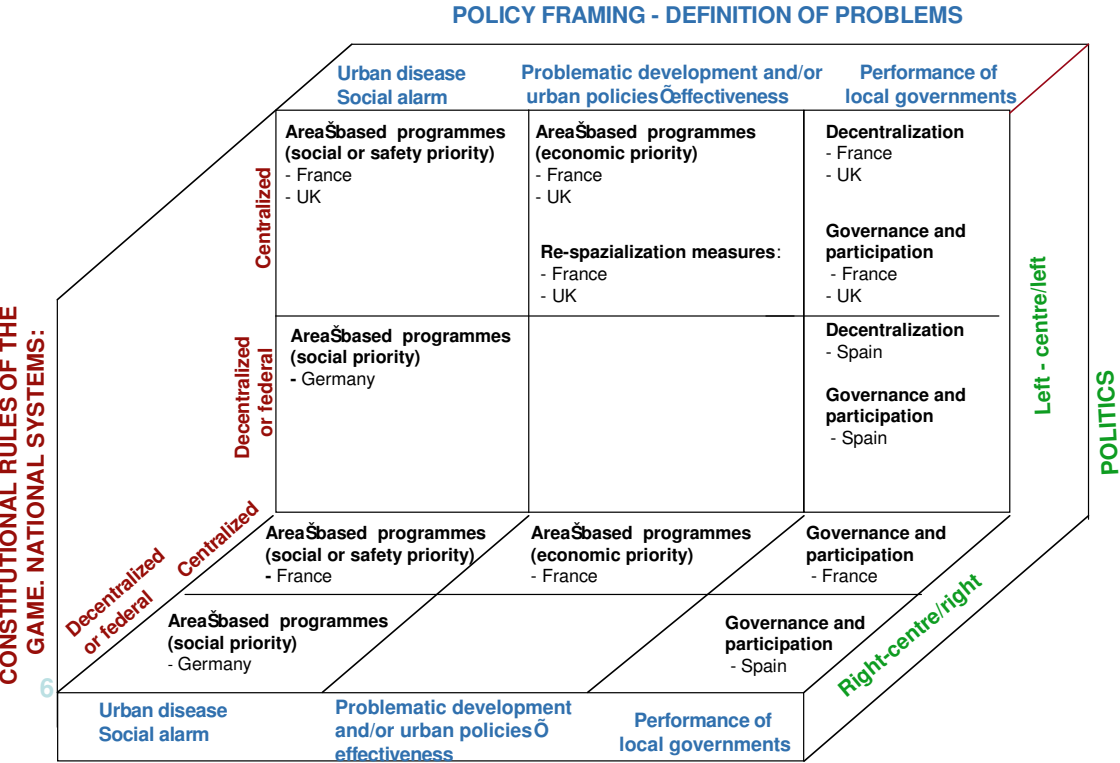


Figure 2 – Factors affecting national urban agenda-setting

(b) *The intensity and kind of political attention* is a complex factor, and clearly an important one. Political actors in general, and particularly when acting as policy entrepreneurs, select and define urban challenges and interpret external pressures. Actors are not only under the influence of economic and political interests, but also driven by cognitive frames (Fischer 2003) as well as rhetoric used to define problems and coupling them with solutions, often remaining within current «orthodox» discourses. In the last decades these have been strongly influenced by different versions of neo-liberalism. This observation was made in reference to the official discourse of British governments and the way they constructed urban policy through the use of narratives (Atkinson 2000). There are cases

in which a social disease specifically perceived and defined as *urban* gives rise to events that produce discourse of social alarm and emergency. In these cases, the need to shape public opinion and reassure constituencies is the prevailing force in shaping policy frames and the political agenda. Since the '80s, the *Politique de la ville* as well as UK area-based programs were launched, renewed and funded again during perceived circumstances of acute social crisis, such as those affecting the French *banlieues* and the English inner cities. In both cases, the subsequent turn toward a security frame present at a later stage is particularly demonstrative of this process.

In France and the UK, urban social and economic disease had become paradigmatic of the prominent territorial dimension (urban sprawl, social polarization) of cleavages present in the national society. However, the German area-based programs entered the agenda under the pressure of less alarming phenomena. This, together with the above-mentioned constitutional factor, explains why in Germany *explicit* and *direct* urban policies are carried out, but with less emphasis? than in France and the UK. So far, national area-based programs have not been carried out at all in Spain for reasons similar to those of Germany. In Spain's case, this can be explained by the even lower level of alarm over social and economic problems perceived and represented as urban ones, and by the country's strong regional competences.

Explicit but *indirect* urban policies promoting the re-spatialization of governance and local public policies are carried out when problems identified as specifically urban (at the level of cities, metropolitan areas or urban-regions) enter the agenda not as an effect of acute crisis, but rather because evidence is present that local policies, especially aimed at urban and/or regional development, are underperforming. These measures can only be carried out by national authorities that have constitutional permission to take direct action, as is the case in France and the UK, but not in Spain and Germany.

Implicit urban policies enter the agenda when problems are not specifically defined by policy makers as urban ones, and when political attention to them is not caused by the perception of acute crisis. The resulting actions – addressing various economic, social (*mainstream* policies) or institutional (innovation policies) issues – may have important, though unintended impacts on a city's economic and social life..

(c) *The role of politics*, is one that concerns the orientation of ruling actors, the kind of leadership that is introduced, and the occurrence of political change. The role of politics does not significantly affect the kind of policy responses (*explicit* vs. *implicit*; *direct* vs. *indirect*) to urban challenges,

since both centre-left and centre-right governments have carried out all the four types of policy. As concerns urban issues, the nature of preferences and priorities is partially different, even though polarized to a lesser extent than the rhetoric prevailing in partisan politics is. As far as radical vs. «temperate» neo-liberalism and subsequent policy paradigms based on growth or/and cohesion are concerned, underlying values and beliefs are obviously important in order to set policy priorities. During the observed period, all four countries have been subject to alternation between centre-right and centre-left leaders, parties or coalitions., However, this reality has neither prompted radical changes in the setting of national urban agendas, nor has it deeply influenced choice of policy priorities and instruments.

In Germany, the *explicit* urban policy is not only less important than in France and the UK, but, it is also less frequently the subject of debate, and is also allegedly bipartisan. Notwithstanding communicative rhetoric, in France and the UK, urban policy frames are less controversial one might expect. This might be attributed to what appears to be a minor influence on policies exerted by political cleavages, which is a widespread tendency in contemporary Western political systems. In turn, political cleavages are less (or are not at all) influenced by fierce opposition between capital and labour. For this reason the construction of economic and social problems and solutions by conservative and progressive political actors, who accepted to support market dynamism and policies seeking competitiveness, can converge more easily. For example, area-based programs for urban economic growth carried out by both centre-left and centre-right governments are based on the shared representation of cities' and urban regions' need for comparative and competitive advantages (Jessop 2002). Similarly, the programs aimed at social priorities mostly share the paradigm of social cohesion. In a similar way the fragmentation of local policies on a regional scale is commonly seen as risky and, it is thus tackled through re-spatialization measures. Such «orthodox» constructions of urban problems and political solutions illustrate the reconcilable policy approaches of centre-right and centre-left governments. But political reconcilability does not necessarily mean that economic and social priorities can actually be addressed without contradictions. This also helps explain why clear urban policy strategies hardly ever emerge and why the summation of different actions may bring about fuzzy policy frames.

An apparent exception is the major tendency of centre-left governments to decentralize power and strengthen local authorities (*implicit* and *indirect* urban policy). At least in the cases of France and the UK, this tendency has

more to do with the relationships between central and local political actors than it does with contrasting ideologies and visions of state organization. The dominant parties of center-left are more territorially rooted in cities than center-right parties. This could explain keenness to provide local actors with more power and to include them in the making of national policies. However, centre-right parties are more likely to foster the inclusion of private interests in the making of urban policies than to strengthen local authorities.

One must also consider the fact that area-based programs, as well as institutional reforms, are multi-year policies. Therefore, it is often difficult for a newly elected government or new political entrepreneurs to make decisions which would rapidly redirect the inertial effects of a previous government's preferences (even though those in France and the UK have been keen to leave their symbolic marks on these policies). In short, political alternation is another reason why there may be no single or clearly prevalent definition of policy problems among a state's actions directed toward cities. Several interpretations may coexist or alternate during the governing period, providing the implementers with more than one possible line for action.

(ii) States' urban policies, in particular area-based programs, show continuity, even though policy discourses, keywords, goals and instruments may change over time, following the activism of new policy entrepreneurs. Knowledge and criticisms about limited outcomes are either ignored or used for adapting programs. However, adaptation usually entails changing these programs marginally, but remaining within the same type of policy. Thus, national urban agendas appear as an area of policy in which some governments (especially those of France and the UK) try to appear committed and engaged, even when they seem to have a minor interest in actual outcomes.

The persistence of public actions in presence of limited outcomes is a issue that political and social sciences have indirectly addressed. Academics have used categories referring to more general phenomena such as those of symbolic politics (Edelman 1964) and symbolic policies, in particular when «deviations between the publicly stated political goals and the more complex reality known only to insiders» is to be explained (Gustaffson 1983, 275). Persistence can also evoke explanations based either on path dependency, especially in highly institutionalized policy contexts, or on policy takers' and/or policy givers' interests.

According to Walgrave & Van Aelst (2006) political agendas can be placed on a continuum ranging from substantial to symbolic. As happens with

several other policies, state urban agendas occupy an intermediate position, in which the two dimensions are not to be considered mutually exclusive, but both present and intertwined. From this perspective, communication is as important as tangible regulatory, distributive, or redistributive consequences (impacts) of policy actions and changes. Thus, it is to be considered as a «latent» motive for governments' agency on urban issues, which is as much important as «manifest» motives in shaping policy discourses, frames and political agendas. Two streams of communication can explain why national urban agendas appear as areas of policy in which governments engage themselves even when they seem less interested in actual outcomes.

A first communication stream is between national political actors and public opinion and constituencies. Reassuring the latter in presence of acute and threatening crisis can be important enough to justify the amount of resources invested in *explicit* and *direct* urban policies. This is the case even when, according to economic and social indicators, the correspondent multi-year policy is not considered that successful. For example, urban safety is a increasingly important issue in urban policies and politics, charged with symbolic meanings (Jonas & Ward 2002). Leaders and candidates put it on the top of their agendas and believe that consensus may come from commitment against individual and collective deviant behaviour. Such a factor may explain some shifts in the manifest frame of urban policies, like those occurring when political answers switch from actions aimed at tackling social diseases (poverty, exclusion, deprivation of places) to punishment and «zero tolerance», combined with economic competitiveness. Furthermore, the combination of the flexibility and institutionalization of these kind of programs provides a window of opportunity that political actors can use in order to leave a visible mark on policies. The more the latter is institutionalized, the more the room for manoeuvre is constrained by path dependence on previous policy making.

A second communication stream is between national government actors and the «insiders», who take on an active role in policy and governance networks at different territorial levels. The renewal or extension of programs along the same policy type (and the consequent expenditure) makes it possible for several recipients, such as political, administrative, private and social actors involved in the implementation of these programs at the national and infra-national levels to get (not only substantial and material) resources from the state. This can reinforce both horizontal and vertical coalitions (public-public and public-private). *Indirect* urban policies also provide local actors with resources for governability.

Even the most symbolic aspects of policy-making to address urban issues can bring about substantial consequences. This is especially the case when the lack of well-designed and effective strategies aimed at practical problem-solving is compensated for by the willingness to build consensus, for example, to address social alarm or to distribute resources among a set of recipients narrower than the wide public of policy takers. Symbolization processes are not only useful for building consensus, but also for indirectly providing substantial distributive choices with a wider legitimization. Thus, latent motives turn out to be rather important in the making of policies responding to perceived urban challenges.

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