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Territorial cohesion – Metropolitan Regions as new forms of urban-rural partnership and territorial governance model

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Results from the PolyMetrexPlus project and Emilia-Romagna Region spatial planning

In order to deepen how Metropolitan regions can represent new forms of urban-rural partnership, I illustrate some examples deriving from Emilia-Romagna Region experience and from the conclusions of the PolyMetrexPlus project.

First of all it is important to clarify the concept of rural, that includes situations very differentiated each other in respect of the social, economical and settlement aspects.

The differences depend on:

- the localisation in Europe: in Holland or in northern Sweden
- the proximity to a Metropolitan area: near Milan or in Estremadura
- the level of economical development and public and private wealth: Northern Italy or Bulgaria.

Moreover, in many developed areas, there is not a clear distinction and a recognisable passage between rural areas and urban sprawl.

For these reasons it is necessary to leave behind a simplistic notion of the rural/urban relationship, and to acknowledge the complexity and the variety of situations. In particular it is important to understand the different ways in which this relationship manifests itself at the different territorial scales.

In this view, the urban-rural relationship are examined at three different spatial scales: at the European level, at the macro-regional level (River Po Valley), at the local level (Emilia-Romagna Region). The three levels are strictly intertwined. They are studied in the light of the findings of PolyMetrexPlus project and of the rebalancing and spatial policies of Emilia-Romagna Region.

PolyMetrexPlus was a project that involved 18 metropolitan partners and METREX, with the general purpose to favour the achievement of a more polycentric and territorially balanced Europe by working on the role that urban areas and

infrastructural systems can play. This project was divided into 11 sub-projects, whose purpose was to analyse problems and potentials existing in specific areas and city networks, and propose actions and projects aimed at strengthening their role.

Regarding the three different spatial scales of the urban-rural relationship, at the European level the areas that can be considered rural are primarily constituted by the peripheral and deprived regions and by the areas with a low connectivity.

At this regard the outcomes of PolyMetrexPlus highlight the role of the “rebalancing” metropolitan areas and of the infrastructural corridors in the European context. In particular it is underlined the necessity that corridors act at the service of the crossed areas, often rural ones; the corridors should not be only an infrastructural system that unites two points, but a multimodal backbone, on which commodities, people, information, ideas and cultures travel, so to be permeable to the crossed areas.

From this point of view an example is represented by the project of a new railway Naples-Bari, that has been changed from high speed to a high capacity railway introducing 5 intermediate stops.

At the macro-regional level it is necessary to consider the rural areas as strictly integrated in a great conurbation. For example, the PolyMetrexPlus sub-project on the Po Valley macro-region constituted by Veneto, Piedmont, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, acknowledged the entire valley as an integrated polycentric urban area.

In this vision the rural zones, like the Po riversides and the Alps and Appennini Mountains have to be considered as integrated inside the polycentric “megapolis”, representing not only the “garden” of the urbanised area, but also one of the main resources for economy, environment and landscape.

At the level of a metropolitan region I present the case of Emilia-Romagna Region. In Emilia-Romagna “rural” means mainly hills and mountain areas (40% of the regional surface and 11% of the inhabitants). For the Region, the quality of the mountain area is one of the strategic factors for the development, together with the quality of the urban areas. The regional strategy pursue the goal of a better integration between rural and urban areas. Specifically, in the rural areas the Region intervenes in a special way on the public transportation, school and training services, public offices, ICT diffusion, accessibility for citizens to social and health services.

For example there is a problem of digital divide between the offices of the Public Administration placed in the rural and the ones of the urban areas. Regarding this issue the regional strategy consists in giving to the rural public offices the same quality of the ones placed in the urban areas. This is pursued mainly through relevant investments aimed to enhance the ICT connectivity through a broad band public network based on an integration of copper, optic fibre and satellite technologies. The

local services that can improve their activities thank to this intervention are many: hospitals, health operators, local family doctors, schools, information desks for enterprises and citizens.

In order to reduce the digital divide, the Region signed an agreement with the Italian Government for a national contribution of 15 millions euro (to sum to the 5 millions from the Regional budget).

To implement these policies during the period 2007-2013 Emilia-Romagna Region will spend 390 millions euro, mainly from the new Rural Development Policy.

In conclusion, we can say that at each of this level, the regional and metropolitan governance play a key role in order to achieve a better urban/rural partnership.

- at the level of single metropolis, the key relationships are among the Region, the Metropolitan institutions, the Provinces and the Municipalities also in associated organisations (vertical governance).
- at the macro-regional level the best effectiveness is achieved through agreements among Regions, for example in the ambits of the Po River management, local transport system, research centres networks, policies aimed to reduce air pollution in the urbanised areas; in these cases the horizontal governance, involving metropolitan institutions, is fundamental;
- at the European level the complexity of the problems and of the policies require a multilevel governance system, involving EU Commission, States, Regions and Metropolitan institutions;