

# Chapter 8

## Locating Urban Issues in German Policy-Making: Metropolitan Regions and Urban Development Policies in a Multi-scalar Context



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**Abstract** This contribution explores the emergence and relevance of urban and metropolitan issues in German national policies. In particular, the contribution draws attention to policy shifts, first, toward metropolitan regions in the mid-1990s and, second, toward cities of all sizes in the mid-2000s. Methodologically, the contribution builds on the qualitative-interpretive analysis of policy documents and insights into selected expert interviews. Thereby, the comparison of urban and metropolitan policies in Germany proposes an innovative perspective on the complementarity of metropolitan regions and cities as issues emerging on the political agenda and as actors in the policy-making process. Moreover, analyzing the underlying processes of conceptual and instrumental innovation contributes to understanding the influence of institutional and ideational mechanisms on policy shifts. Theoretically, the analysis reflects on German urban policy-making as a complex process in a multi-scalar system involving communities of practice between academics, applied research institutes, national ministries, federal states' governments and representatives from the municipal level.

**Keywords** Metropolitan regions · Urban development policies · Multi-scalar system · Policy shifts

### 8.1 Introduction

Currently, problems and politics in German cities are controversially debated in the wider public (see for instance the special issue 'Stadt' in the journal *ApuZ*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2017). Urban issues such as housing, municipal debts and city rankings continue to attract the interest of politicians, media and citizens. This new wave of attention toward cities stands in a long tradition of dealing with urban questions in numerous disciplines. In the 1980s and 1990s, German academics were pointing to a crisis of the city—perceived as a social crisis related

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167

to segregation (Häußermann and Siebel 1979: 620ff)—coining an understanding of cities as hotspots (*Brennpunkte* according to Heinelt and Wollmann 1991) with a negative and problem-oriented view.

This contribution traces two recent shifts in German urban policies since the mid-1990s toward a positive framing of urban issues: first, the introduction of ‘European metropolitan regions’ and, second, ‘national urban development policies.’ The following sections will first analyze the appearance of metropolitan regions in the mid-1990s when national spatial planning introduced the concept which drew new attention toward the potentials of large city-regions. To some extent, this conceptual innovation implied a shift in the perception of ‘the urban’ in Germany. Scholars mainly focused on the trajectories of ‘metropolitan regions’ as an ambivalent concept in the planning debate. Schmitt (2009), for instance, studied the emergence of metropolitan regions as a social construct and argued that particular actors and constellations supported the discursive process. Bege (2010) traced the disciplinary origins of metropolitan regions as a concept in planning, geography and politics. Hesse and Leick (2016) proposed a discourse-analytical perspective on positions and argumentations on metropolitan regions in the context of the German spatial planning principles. Moreover, Gravert and colleagues (2013) studied the careers of dominant themes in the German planning debate with a focus on agenda setting as a political process. Less attention was paid to the emergence of metropolitan regions as the result of agenda setting in a multi-scalar system.

This contribution analyzes the second shift that took place in the early-2000s. During this period, urban issues re-emerged on the national policy agenda and several observers identified an urban renaissance in Germany. For example, Gornig and Geppert (2004) were speaking of a re-urbanization trend regarding the economic potentials of large cities. Adam and Sturm (from the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, BBSR 2011) explored the link between the new attractiveness of cities and population growth. This positive framing of cities paved the way to enhance the recognition of urban issues in national policies in the mid-2000s.

Considerable research has been devoted to cities as territorial jurisdictions coining a formal understanding of municipal politics (*Kommunalpolitik*).<sup>1</sup> Under the label of local policy research (*Lokale Politikforschung*, see for instance Heinelt and Wollmann 1991; Heinelt and Mayer 1993; Häußermann et al. 2008), scholars contributed to a progressive perspective on local policy sectors such as housing, social welfare or environmental policies. Less attention has been paid to national policies on urban issues, with the exception of Bogumil and colleagues (2008) who focus on the emergence of urban questions on the political agenda in the context of national urban development policies. In addition to these scholarly accounts, the policy debate is characterized by applied studies and policy briefs on urban issues in Germany from

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<sup>1</sup>see Häußermann (1991), for reflections on local self-government; see Dieckmann (2001), for an overview on responsibilities dedicated to cities in the German constitutional law; see Benz (2012), on the positioning of cities in German federalism; and see Heinz (2018), for a timely account on the municipal room for maneuver.

research institutes or international organizations (see among many others OECD (1999) and for more detail below).

While previous studies have examined metropolitan regions and urban policies separately, it is important to consider the relationship between policies for metropolitan regions and policies which address a broader range of urban issues. Accordingly, this contribution explores the emergence of metropolitan regions and cities of all sizes as complementary issues in the German political process. Thereby, we draw particular attention to agenda setting in the context of the institutional structures and knowledge communities.

In concrete terms, this contribution describes and analyzes the trajectories of urban and metropolitan concepts in German national policies since the mid-1990s. More precisely, two main questions are addressed. First, how have urban and metropolitan policies in Germany developed at the national scale since the 1990s and what were the key concepts of major policy shifts? The focus on concepts' trajectories builds on the assumption that the debate on urban questions—proposing a balanced view on cities of all sizes—evolved complementary to the mantra-like interest in metropolitan regions—according to Leber and Kunzmann (2006) a metropolitan fever. For explaining these dynamics, a second, subordinate question addresses how key actors, institutional structures and alliances influence policy-making in the German multi-scalar system. Thereby, the analysis of German understandings of 'the urban' contributes to the edited book's overall focus on processes and actors producing urban agendas.

Methodologically, the contribution builds on a qualitative-interpretive analysis of policy documents, selected expert interviews and previous findings on the emergence of metropolitan policies in Germany (see Fricke 2017, forthcoming). Moreover, with this interpretive approach to case studies, the contribution adopts an inductive research design, which attempts at making sense of findings in the light of existing theoretical approaches. Accordingly, comparison and theoretical interpretation of the concepts and policy developments will be suggested after the empirical descriptions of the two policies.

The contribution is structured as follows. The section hereafter gives an overview of academic definitions and conceptualizations of 'the urban' in the German context. Section 8.3 describes the emergence of metropolitan regions as an innovative concept in the federal spatial planning principles in the mid-1990s. Section 8.4 then describes the emergence of the national urban development policy which developed an integrative approach toward cities of all sizes in the mid-2000s. Section 8.5 compares the main characteristics of the two policies presented in the previous sections. Section 8.6 consults theoretical approaches that contribute to explaining the relevance of the institutional context and ideational mechanisms. The final section draws conclusions and sketches potential lines for future development.

## 8.2 Locating ‘The Urban’ in the German Academic and Political Context

The urban is a realm of daily encounter for the majority of the German population. At the same time, German academics have suggested a plethora of definitions and concepts of the city. Siebel (2010: 3) notes that ‘a dialogue on the city in general would not be reasonable. Too diverse are the realities that hide behind the short word city.’<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Rink and Haase (2018: 473–474) assume that the number of urban concepts or city labels will continue to increase in the coming years, due to ongoing urbanization processes, emerging urban problems, policies, socio-spatial processes and technological development.

With regard to the multiple and varied meanings of ‘the urban,’ this contribution focuses on the particularities how German national policies address urban and metropolitan issues from a policy-analytical perspective. And again, the academic debate omits to provide a coherent understanding of urban policies. According to Heinelt (2013: 185), research on local policies in Germany mainly focuses on cities without a clear definition of the urban. Heinelt (2013: 187) suggests defining urban policy in distinction to municipal policy (*Kommunalpolitik*), which focuses on the legal-administrative context. He coins an understanding of urban policies as being linked to a physically and locally bounded, socio-spatial system of interaction. In line with this progressive understanding of urban policies, this contribution suggests defining national urban policies as programs or approaches at the federal level that explicitly address urban issues and problems. This includes a variety of policy fields, such as spatial planning, building and housing regulations and social welfare. This understanding of urban policies includes not only policies with an urban label but also includes approaches that address urban issues beyond an administrative or formal understanding of the city as a territorially defined jurisdiction or a container space (see also Heinelt 2013: 193).

Accordingly, the following analysis focuses on cities not only as isolated territorial units in a hierarchically ordered governmental system. It also proposes a perspective on urban policies as involving vertical, inter-governmental and horizontal relations—between the city and its surroundings and between the political sphere and the wider society. Accordingly, policies addressing metropolitan issues and in particular the introduction of European metropolitan policies in the mid-1990s can be subsumed under such an understanding of urban policies.

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<sup>2</sup>All translations from German are provided by the author.

### 8.3 The Emergence of Metropolitan Regions in National Spatial Planning Strategies<sup>3</sup>

Since the rise of metropolitan regions in spatial planning, the concept's understanding and relevance have shifted considerably. The emergence of metropolitan regions represented a conceptual innovation overcoming the previous orientations of German spatial planning which nurtured a problem-centered view on agglomerations. Previous understandings of city-regions have to be understood in the context of the German spatial planning system established after the Second World War. Spatial planning in Germany originally pursued the objectives of balanced development and equal living conditions (see among others Blotevogel 2001: 162). These objectives were embodied in federal planning regulations and spatial plans of the federal states, which supported an equal division of functions in line with Christaller's system of central places. The general planning objectives and instruments coincided with a focus on the negative effects of agglomerations (*Ballungsräume*). In order to compensate for agglomeration effects, planners aimed at balanced functional areas (*ausgeglichenere Funktionsräume*, see Marx et al. 1975).

In the mid-1990s, several conditions enabled the concept of metropolitan regions to gather momentum in the German spatial planning debate. The openness of the concept contributed to a certain euphoria among German academics and practitioners, particularly in the field of spatial planning. Moreover, several aspects created a favorable context for the introduction of a new concept. Germany's balanced urban system lacked a primate or world city comparable to London or Paris. The progressing European integration process thereby opened new perspectives beyond the national borders and inspired the symbolic reference to Europe. In addition, reunification made it necessary to reconsider the relations between the larger agglomerations in East and West Germany. Meanwhile, several larger cities had developed distinct traditions of city-regional cooperation in special purpose association or in regional planning associations between municipalities.

The concept of European metropolitan regions (*Europäische Metropolregionen*) first appeared in the context of spatial planning documents at the federal level. In this initial phase, the main actors were federal ministries, research institutes and representatives from the federal states (*Länder*) and metropolitan regions.<sup>4</sup> In 1992, the orientation framework for spatial policy (*Raumordnungspolitische Orientierungsrahmen*, MKRO 1993) introduced the principle of decentralized concentration. This apparent oxymoron allowed for a dualistic understanding of city-regions as problematic areas coping with negative agglomeration effects and, at the same time, as key locations for spatial development. In 1995, the action framework for spatial plan-

<sup>3</sup>The subsequent section largely builds on the empirical findings of Sect. 6.2 in Fricke (2020).

<sup>4</sup>The ministers from the federal states gather in the Federal Conference of Ministers for Spatial Planning, *Ministerkonferenz für Raumordnung*, MKRO. Supported by a national ministry and the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, *Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung*, BBSR, the MKRO agrees on the national spatial planning principles.

ning policy (*Raumordnungspolitischer Handlungsrahmen*, MKRO 1995) explicitly coined the term European metropolitan regions. The subsequent spatial planning report (*Raumordnungsbericht*, BBR 2000) strongly connects to several principles suggested in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) from 1999 such as polycentric spatial development beyond the so-called pentagon in Western Europe. Therefore, the spatial planning report (BBR 2000: 212) refers to the concept of a polycentric urban system which allows strengthening metropolitan regions and urban networks.

The introduction of European metropolitan regions can be interpreted as a conceptual innovation, creating positive attention for larger city-regions in Germany. This involved a reframing from a functional-analytical perspective on city-regions as agglomerations to an understanding of metropolitan regions as political-symbolic decision-making centers and motors of economic growth. While this positive connotation was rather new in the German context, it aligns with concurrent academic approaches toward cities as growth poles or hubs for economic development. Accordingly, the concept was rhetorically embedded in a wider debate on global or world cities (cf. Adam 2006: 12). Later, metropolitan regions were framed as a hierarchical level in addition to the existing system of central places (see Petrin and Knieling 2009: 308).

Metropolitan regions were introduced as an abstract, symbolic concept. Beyond the mentioning in federal spatial planning documents, the establishment of metropolitan regions had no comprehensive legal basis. Some observers feared that the initiators of metropolitan regions intended to launch a territorial reform of the federal states in disguise (Diller 2014, 2016). Yet, the concept did neither involve territorial reform nor additional funding (Zimmermann and Heinelt 2012: 69). A position paper of two national associations in the field of spatial planning, on the contrary, demanded even a more pragmatic approach to the governance of large city-regions (ARL and DASL 2004). Nevertheless, the positive connotation of the term and its open, voluntary and non-binding character gave new impulses to the governance of German city-regions. The planning principles (MKRO, Geschäftsstelle im BMVBS 2006: 14) allowed organizational models in metropolitan regions to vary by letting the regions define their spatial perimeters themselves.

After the introduction of metropolitan regions into the German spatial planning principles, several observers and practitioners criticized the accompanying paradigmatic change (see for an overview Hesse and Leick 2016: 9ff). Academic critique mainly concerned the approach's overall neoliberal orientation toward economic competitiveness (Federwisch 2012: 57) in combination with the disregard of rural and peripheral areas (Leber and Kunzmann 2006). Moreover, non-metropolitan actors, such as the German Farmers' Association and the German County Association (Deutscher Bauernverband and Deutscher Landkreistag 2006), rejected the focus on larger urban areas and suggested strengthening rural areas (see also Kawka and Staats 2016: 353).

As a result, the 2006 spatial planning principles adopted a conciliatory stance in order to balance opposing voices that criticized the overemphasis on large city-regions (Harrison and Growe 2014: 14). Subsequently, the federal ministry respon-

sible for spatial planning introduced two alternative concepts. First, urban–rural partnerships (*Stadt-Land-Partnerschaften*) presented a dualistic understanding of cooperation between cities and their rural surroundings. Second, the concept of large-scale communities of responsibility (*großräumige Verantwortungsgemeinschaften*) proposed even wider cooperation areas, intending to conciliate between urban centers and peripheral areas. Both concepts can be interpreted as attempts by federal actors to reframe the concept of metropolitan regions in order to make it broader and more inclusive. While urban–rural partnerships became a topical subject in the context of the preparatory action of the European Union on urban–rural linkages (European Parliament et al. 2011), the large-scale approach remained less pertinent in practice. Both concepts contributed a more inclusive understanding of metropolitan regions. In line with these developments, the 2016 spatial planning principles used metropolitan regions as one spatial category among others instead of an exceptional category. The text still refers to metropolitan regions as economic motors, yet the formulations moreover include other subspaces and rural areas.

In terms of their overall orientation, metropolitan regions' trajectory in German policies resembles a pendular movement. The concept represents a shift from a previous orientation toward balanced spatial development to a growth-oriented, back to conciliatory approaches of spatial balance and solidarity (see also Schmitt 2009). The concretization of the metropolitan concept in programs and projects, however, does not appear as a linear development. Two main story lines are underlying the career of metropolitan regions in Germany. The first story line developed around city-regional coordination and problems between the core and surrounding areas (Zimmermann and Heinelt 2012: 61). The second story line developed by referring to the economic competitiveness of large agglomerations (Scholich 2009: 30f). The combination of both parallel story lines produces a reconciling dualism between the internal and external orientation of cities, between economic growth and spatial integration and between the center and the periphery (see Aring and Sinz 2006: 48; Scholich 2009: 31).

In the mid-2010s, the euphoria for metropolitan regions lessened at the federal level. Metropolitan regions remain a category in the federal spatial planning principles, yet there are fewer federal programs offered specifically for metropolitan regions. Nevertheless, representatives from several metropolitan regions continue to work together in a network initiative (*Initiativkreis Europäische Metropolregionen in Deutschland*, IKM). Particularly, metropolitan regions with consolidated and institutionalized forms of governance, such as Stuttgart, Hannover and Hamburg, remain actively engaged in the national and European policy debate. Metropolitan regions with more flexible or privately led organizations such as Rhein-Neckar or Nuremberg continue their activities including marketing and informal coordination. Some of the regions such as Rhein-Ruhr, Central Germany or Berlin-Brandenburg show a lower level of activities. This overall declining attention toward metropolitan regions is moreover situated in the context of the appearance of national urban policies for cities of all sizes in the mid-2000s.



## 8.4 Shift Toward Cities of All Sizes in National Urban Development Policies

The mid-2000s marked a turning point for urban policies in Germany. Due to the previous lack of an explicit national program on urban development, the national level only occasionally cooperated with cities on urban issues, for instance, in the joint program labeled ‘social city’ (*Soziale Stadt*) initiated in 1999 (see Dangschat and Hamedinger 2005: 323 and 326f) and urban redevelopment programs focusing on the built environment (*Stadterneuerung*). In 2007, a new national urban policy for cities of all sizes (*Städte aller Größenordnungen*) gained momentum. The national urban development policies (*Nationale Stadtentwicklungspolitik*, NSP, see BMI 2019) represented an attempt to coordinate political approaches toward urban questions. Bogumil et al. (2008: 120) describe this integrated approach toward cities as part of a new discourse in urban policies.

A number of initiatives paved the way for this new discourse. An experimental format named *Ideenwettbewerb Stadt 2030* (competition for ideas on the city 2030, 2000–2004, see BMBF (2004) for an overview of the results) provided ideas for integrated approaches to urban development, involving pilot projects and a research consortium. Additionally, the renaming of the federal ministry into Ministry for Transportation, Building and Urban Development in November 2005 expressed an increased political will to position urban issues on the national agenda (cf. Güntner 2007: 111; Bogumil et al. 2008: 124). In 2007, the Leipzig Charta as a policy document at the European level represented a starting point for an urban development policy at the national level (cf. BBSR 2017).

The national urban development policy was designed as a coordinative framework. A national memorandum of policy makers and a parliamentary resolution contributed to the formation of the NSP as a framework for vertical and horizontal coordination. The joint program was initiated by actors on the federal level and involves vertical cooperation with partners from the federal states and representatives from local government associations. Moreover, the initiative involves horizontal coordination between departments. One of the NSP’s intentions was to reinforce the public interest in urban issues and raise awareness among national ministries:

At the national level, all ministries should realize that cities play an important role for achieving national, regional and local objectives and that their sectorial measures have effects on cities. (Hatzfeld and Jakubowski 2008: 132)

Currently, the program is led by the responsible national ministry and involves ministries from the federal states.

National urban development policy in Germany follows an integrative and integrated approach. First, the initiative is integrative by involving cities of various sizes. The specific programs address small- and medium-sized cities, which are considered to be particularly relevant for the development of rural areas. Second, cities themselves are framed as integration machines and as places of social and economic integration. Third, the initiative pursues an approach of integrated urban development. It intends to incorporate various urban issues, such as social aspects (employment,



education), civil society, economic development, the built environment and climate adaptation. Critics have raised doubts whether sectorial fragmentation nevertheless remains an issue (Bogumil et al. 2008: 125), due to focus on the competences of the responsible ministry at the time.

Overall, German national urban development policy largely relies on soft policy instruments, such as best practice, calls for projects and communication platforms. The idea of best practice is to improve existing programs (for example *Städtebauförderung*, urban restructuring) without regulations or additional resources. The project-based approach (e.g., in the research program *Experimenteller Wohnungs- und Städtebau (ExWoSt)*, experimental housing and urban construction) follows a similar logic by financing innovative examples of urban development. The platform element intends to foster communication through publications, exchange of knowledge and stakeholder involvement at seminars, workshops and annual events. Stakeholder involvement can also be interpreted as an institutionalized opening for interest representation in the policy-making process. Thereby, the continuous consultation of stakeholders and researchers takes place in formats such as annual congresses and university days. While early voices feared a proneness to a depoliticization of the topic through public involvement (Hatzfeld and Jakubowski 2008: 131), the initiative's openness allows for flexible thematical adaption to current problems.

In the mid-2010s, urban issues—such as the perceived housing crises and the integration of an increased number of migrants—gained public attention. Yet, these issues are not primarily addressed in the national urban development initiative. For instance, in 2017 the government reorganized ministerial competences so that urban issues were again dispersed to various ministries, including the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry for the Environment, Nature Protection, Building and Nuclear Safety.

## 8.5 The Metropolis is Dead—Long Live the City?

The two previous sections describe the emergence of metropolitan and urban issues on the German policy agenda. The metropolitan region as a concept appeared in the national spatial planning principles in the mid-1990s and evolved, as described in Sect. 8.3, around a positive understanding of agglomerations as drivers of economic and spatial development. Thereby, metropolitan regions can be interpreted as a conceptual innovation. A comprehensive approach toward urban issues appeared, as Sect. 8.4 describes, in the mid-2000s addressing cities of all sizes and, in particular, small- and medium-sized cities. This national urban development policy followed an inclusive and integrated approach toward urban development. The national framework can thus be interpreted as a coordinative attempt to bundle a variety of programs on urban issues.

Table 8.1 compares the metropolitan and the urban as two policy concepts with regard to their main characteristics in the German context. The comparison attempts

**Table 8.1** Contrasting selected characteristics of German policies for metropolitan regions and urban development

	Metropolitan policies	Urban policies
Main policy approach at the national level	Spatial planning principles	National urban development policy
Key concept	Metropolitan regions	Cities of all sizes
Auxiliary concepts	Agglomerations, city-regions, urban–rural areas	Neighborhoods, district centers, deprived urban areas
Disciplinary origins	Spatial planning (e.g., central place theory), economic geography (e.g., growth poles)	Urban design, sociology, building and housing
Main story line	Metropolitan regions as hubs in networks and seedbeds for economic growth	Integrated urban development by combining social and material improvement
Main logic	Growth, hierarchy	Integration, equality
Dichotomy	Center-periphery	Urban–rural

to voluntarily contrast the two concepts in order to underline their distinctiveness without implying opposition or succession of the two concepts in policy practice.

A common feature of both approaches is their emphasis on urban issues. In line with the observed renaissance of the city and re-urbanization processes, both approaches brought urban issues back on the national agenda. Regarding the context in which the two approaches emerged—spatial planning and urban redevelopment—metropolitan and urban policies appear to be complementary instead of replacing each other.

## 8.6 Theorizing Agenda Setting in a Multi-scalar Policy Arena

The previously described development of metropolitan and urban issues forms the basis for the subsequent theory-led reflection on agenda setting in urban policies in Germany. The sub-chapters offer an interpretation of the previously described policies. Following an inductive approach to interpretive policy analysis, this represents an attempt at making sense of empirical findings in the light of existing theoretical approaches. The following sections discuss the potential of two theoretical perspectives for explaining the emergence of urban and metropolitan policies in Germany. A first theoretical explanation of these developments is rooted in neo-institutional thinking. According to this perspective, institutional structures and, in particular, the specificities of the German federalism limit the marge of maneuver for national policies on urban and metropolitan issues. The second ideational perspective emphasizes the influence of ideas and knowledge on policy change. Accordingly, the emer-

gence of metropolitan and urban issues on the political agenda can be interpreted as being influenced by policy learning and reframing. Both, institutional and ideational approaches present complementary perspectives for interpreting and understanding the dynamics of urban and metropolitan policy-making in Germany.

### 8.6.1 *German Federalism as a Multi-scalar Policy Arena*

In order to explain conceptual innovation and the renewal of urban policies in Germany, a refined understanding of the political processes in the German federal system is needed. Thereby, the institutional context is decisive for understanding the influence of particular actors and the marge of maneuver at distinctive governmental levels.

Scholars in political science traditionally describe the German political system with regard to its governmental competences, which are divided between the federal level and the *Länder*. According to the constitutional law, municipalities and cities dispose over the right for autonomous self-administration. However, their status as jurisdictions is not codified in the constitution (see Dieckmann 2001: 16; Benz 2012: 346). In practice, municipalities in Germany have a strong democratic legitimation through the direct election of local representatives. Moreover, municipalities play an important role in regard to taxation and the implementation of policies in the sense of decentralized administration. Despite reforms in the mid-2000s, which attempted entangling shared competences between the federal level and the *Länder*, German federalism still holds potential for political stalemate and gridlock.<sup>5</sup>

The above-mentioned examples of metropolitan and urban issues appearing on the national policy agenda show that German policy-making takes place in a multi-scalar system, which involves federal ministries, the *Länder* governments and interest groups from the municipal level. The development of a national approach toward metropolitan regions or cities of all sizes is therefore not a formalized process in which national policy makers suggest a top-down program. In the case of metropolitan regions, instead, the spatial planning principles are an outcome of the cooperation between ministers of the *Länder*, national ministries and other actors, such as research institutes with an observatory status in the federal conference. National urban development policies are initiated at the federal level and involve various stakeholders and governmental levels.

The findings described above correspond with Benz' (2012: 348–349) account of the new relationship between cities and the state. According to Benz (2012: 353–354), new forms of governance include indirect steering through objectives, standards and competitions. The initiative of national urban development policies makes use of soft policy instruments, such as best practice, knowledge exchange and consultations with stakeholders. Metropolitan regions were differently addressed through symbolic

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<sup>5</sup>See Scharpf (2009), for his updated problematization of the *Politikverflechtungsfalle* from an institutional perspective and Kunzmann (2004: 76), for the field of urban policies.

frameworks, knowledge exchange in working groups and monitoring. In both cases, the actors at metropolitan and local level were involved either directly in consultations or through their representatives in municipal interest groups. This corresponds to Dangschat and Hamedinger's (2005) observations of a corporatist involvement of municipalities in decision making at the national level.

The previous analysis also needs to be reflected in the context of the German multi-scalar system, which limits the marge of maneuver for national policy-making. As the examples above show, national policies on urban and metropolitan issues are either coordinative or symbolic in their character. Party-political affiliations play only a partial role, for instance, when urban issues are reassigned to specific ministerial responsibilities after national elections and government formations. In the field of urban policies, cleavages between governmental levels or types of jurisdictions appear to be more relevant for the actors' positioning in policy-making process. Additionally, the influence of particular interest networks or communities of practice (in Germany called *Fachbruderschaften*) explains some of the shifts in metropolitan and urban approaches.

### ***8.6.2 Conceptual Shifts as an Outcome of Policy Learning and Reframing Processes***

The institutional context provides only a limited explanation for the emergence of new concepts and innovative policy instruments for urban and metropolitan issues in Germany. Accordingly, this section considers the role of ideas and the influence of individual actors. In the first step, this sub-chapter briefly lays out academic understandings of policy learning and epistemic communities as a frame for the following interpretation. In the second step, the section reflects on the influence of research communities and individuals on metropolitan and urban policies in Germany.

Since the 1990s, the influence of ideas in the policy-making process has been conceptualized in theoretical approaches that focus on the relationship between knowledge and action. One prominent ideational approach is the concept of policy learning suggested by Hall (1993). According to Hall (1993: 278)

Learning is conventionally said to occur when individuals assimilate new information, including that based on past experience, and apply it to their subsequent actions. Therefore, we can define social learning as a deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience and new information.

A more recent systematization by Dunlop and Radaelli (2013: 599) starts from a minimalist definition of learning 'as the updating of beliefs based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis or social interaction [...].' Radaelli and Dunlop differentiate four forms of learning depending on the level of certainty and the actors involved. In Dunlop and Radaelli's understanding, epistemic communities (Haas 1992) represent one form of learning, which explains policy change through shifts in expert knowledge:

An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area. (Haas 1992: 3)

Besides, other approaches have pointed to implicit forms of knowledge acquisition which influence policy-making, such as communities of practice.

In German urban and metropolitan policy-making, communities of practice's influence become apparent when looking at the extent to which studies by applied research institutes and think tanks contributed to framing the urban and metropolitan regions as policy issues. In the case of metropolitan regions in Germany, academic concepts influenced agenda setting and the subsequent political process. The BBSR, for instance, was importantly involved in the preparation of the spatial planning principles and thereby contributed to the emergence of metropolitan regions as a conceptual innovation. BBSR experts produced several maps that coined the visual and spatial imaginaries of metropolitan regions in Germany. The spatial planning reports (*Raumordnungsberichte*) and other studies, such as an empirical analysis of metropolitan regions in Europe (BBSR 2010), contributed to a refined understanding of metropolitan regions as locations with exceptional functions in the urban system. Moreover, particular associations of researchers and practitioners reinforced but also critically reflected the shift toward metropolitan regions in the late-1990s (see for instance ARL and DASL 2004). To some extent, these developments correspond to a process of social learning and updating of attitudes.

Moreover, these actors did not only promote academic knowledge in the sense of epistemic communities. While they bridged various disciplines, they acted as brokers of applied forms of knowledge. Due to the proximity between applied research and policy makers in German spatial planning, such communities of knowledge *and* practice contributed to establishing metropolitan regions as a positive concept for addressing Germany's largest city-regions (see also Hesse and Leick 2016: 2 and 4). Within these communities, individual actors appeared as *passeurs* between separate arenas, including universities, applied research and ministerial decision-makers (Fricke, 2020). In the context of metropolitan regions, for instance, Blotevogel and Sinz are esteemed to be such knowledge brokers, who contributed to an operationalization of an abstract academic concept into the German planning practice.<sup>6</sup>

In the field of urban development policies, two other types of actors influenced the agenda setting phase. First, representatives from small- and medium-sized cities were key stakeholders and addressees of the national urban development policy. The influence of this type of cities might explain the reframing and conceptual shift in the early-2000s away from larger cities toward cities of all sizes. Second, the consultation of experts was organized formally and transparent in a consortium of federal ministers, *Länder* and municipal representatives, and associations of architects, planners and other experts. In addition, the advisory board involved researchers with expertise in diverse fields of urban development. This organized stakeholder consultation can be interpreted as a form of intentional learning in-between communities, crossing disciplinary boundaries and overcoming parochial perspectives.

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<sup>6</sup>See for instance Blotevogel (1998), for earlier publications on metropolitan functions.

## 8.7 Conclusion

The development of policies for metropolitan regions in the mid-1990s and for cities of all sizes in the mid-2000s in Germany was influenced by the multi-scalar federal system and the communities of practice and knowledge. Those created windows of opportunity for conceptual and instrumental innovation. The shifts in understandings of metropolitan regions and urban issues hint to a general reframing of urban questions in the German policy arena. Similar to the emergence of urban actors in other contexts, such as the EU, the image of the urban as a passive location for problematic issues has been gradually replaced by an understanding of cities as active agents for problem-solving (see also Barbehön and Münch 2017: 4–5). Therefore, the appearance of metropolitan regions and cities can be read as parallel story lines which developed in separate, yet complementary policy arenas. The comparison of the concepts of metropolitan regions and cities of all sizes in the German political context carved out their complementary character. Analyzing shifts in metropolitan and urban policies also showed that they are far from forming a coherent or hierarchically structured policy field.

Furthermore, the analysis of the trajectories of urban and metropolitan concepts in national policies yields insights into how institutions and ideas influence policy-making processes in Germany. German urban and metropolitan policies are characterized by the iterative and corporatist influence of selected interest groups and knowledge communities throughout the policy-making process. Moreover, this contribution revealed some potential explanations for the emergence of urban questions on the policy agenda, such as the German multi-scalar system and the proximity between applied research and the political sphere. Thereby, the contribution showed that agenda setting in policies on urban and metropolitan issues in Germany builds on two mechanisms. First, metropolitan regions and urban issues experienced a certain politization while emerging on the agenda of national policy makers. The debate on metropolitan regions took a rather conflictual path, while the initiative that resulted in national urban development policies was supported by a change in governmental organization and a parliamentary resolution. Second, the policy shifts in both fields were related to specific windows of opportunity. In the case of metropolitan regions, the context of European integration and reunification allowed for a coalition of academics, research institutes, federal governments and ministerial actors to introduce a new understanding of agglomerations. In the case of urban development policies, governmental change created a certain momentum which supported the introduction of a coordinative framework and new instruments.

Finally, what are the implications of this analysis of the appearance of urban and metropolitan issues on the policy agenda for future answers to urban questions in Germany? This contribution shows that the attention toward metropolitan regions has decreased at the national scale and federal policy makers have reduced their activities. Moreover, other issues such as migration, climate change, aging infrastructure and housing are allocated to the responsibilities of diverse federal ministries. This process contributes to an increased fragmentation of competences concerning urban

issues. Accordingly, national urban policies continue to be challenged in creating an integrated and cross-sectorial approach toward the urban.

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