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Sustainability in Small States: Luxembourg as a Post-suburban Space Under Growth Pressure in Need of a Cross-National Sustainability

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Background

Over 25 years ago, at the United Nations conference in Rio, local governments were called on to take action toward sustainable development. It was believed that the best way to achieve a new paradigm of global sustainability was through a multiplicity of local initiatives. In practice, the directive translated into a call to urban planning departments worldwide to re-examine their planning traditions and explore ways to foster sustainable development. Europe responded (Krueger and Gibbs 2007), and till today the moniker of sustainable development remains a powerful concept in European urban planning circles. However, several scholars have documented the limited success thus far. Carr et al. (2015) showed how sustainable development policies in Europe have, in practice, achieved very little headway in terms of addressing the fundamental underlying problems that triggered the call for sustainable development in the first place: sometimes the formulation of sustainability was too fuzzy and blurred; sometimes the approaches were too top-down and insensitive to specific local variations; sometimes planners and activists (alike) were so fixated on planning orthodoxies—such as density or integration—that the point was missed altogether; and, sustainability approaches have increasingly been driven by market forces. These authors show that there is no recipe for sustainability to date.

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While this chapter generally addresses sustainability in Europe, it zeroes in on one particular kind of sustainability dilemma found on the continent—that of small states under growth pressure, unfolding as post-suburban spaces. The chapter draws on the case of Luxembourg, but the challenges can be echoed in other bordered spaces across the continent as well—such as Switzerland, or perhaps Monaco, Lichtenstein, or Belgium—and contrasts other European contexts such as shrinking regions in Germany, or places in macroeconomic crisis such as Greece or Spain. In this regard, the chapter aims to expose how political-economic and spatial context shapes sustainability challenges, and further, how examining the networked flows is likely a better assessment of sustainability problems than are evaluations of isolated place-based projects.

This argument lays at the intersection of several literatures on urban sustainable development. First, the study presented here challenges the assumption that “small is beautiful” that still underlies a lot of scholarship in urban sustainability (Wheeler and Beatley 2008). Following this paradigm, sustainability can be achieved through a formula of population density, the generating of walkable communities that bring people together, neighborhood greening, and technological innovation toward the reduction of fossil fuel consumption particularly in the transport and building sectors (Wheeler and Beatley 2008; Frey 2011). By some accounts, the formulas are also surprisingly overrationalized. Take, for example, Newman’s (2014) calculation toward the improved provision of transit, walking, and cycling opportunities in town centers:

A pedestrian catchment area, or ‘ped-shed’, based on a 10-minute walk, creates an area of approximately 10 000 resident and jobs within this 10-minutes walking area. [...] If a walking city center is required, then a density of 100 per ha is needed. This gives an idea of the kind of activity that a town center would need: approximately 100 000 residents and jobs within this 10-minute walking area. [...] Lower numbers than this means that services in a town center are non-viable [...] This also means that the human design qualities of the center are compromised because of the need for excessive amounts of parking. (p. 20)

Others suggest, too, that to achieve sustainability, such central nodes of activity might be further networked along the tenants of Walter Christaller’s central place theory (Knox and Mayer 2009), a strange reference indeed—perhaps for Europeans in particular—considering the frightening motivations behind his project of *Lebensraum* (Barnes and Minca 2013). Absent of analyses on, to name a few, the makeup of the labor force and employment possibilities, the provision of hospitals or schools, value chains of food

production, and the political economy of land use, these measurements and models are difficult to understand. Underlying these is a localism that has also been critiqued as a “local trap” (Born and Purcell 2006) and that overlooks the multi-scalar relations that contextualize place-based and well-meaning sustainability initiatives (Carr and Affolderbach 2014). This chapter presents the case of Luxembourg, which may seem beautiful and small, yet, hardly a textbook example of sustainable development. This conclusion is revealed upon examination of the social production and spatial arrangements of its networked flows that constitute it.

The second set of literature that is relevant here are the debates in policy mobilities that examine how policies are imported and exported. Recipe-oriented place-based sustainability or so-called best practices are a prime example of policies on the move, where policy-makers observe good ideas in one location and attempt to apply them within their own jurisdictions. Policy mobility debates expose that such attempts to transfer policies often overlook specific sociopolitical and economic conditions. That is, policies cannot merely be transferred from one locale and cookie-cut onto another locale elsewhere. Scholars of policy mobility have demonstrated, for example, that Business Improvement Districts and New Urbanism are not policy agendas that can simply be copied in different places with the hopes of achieving the same results (e.g., see McCann and Ward 2010; Peck and Theodore 2001): Context matters. Policy mobility scholars argue that context matters. The critique also applies to sustainable development policies. There now exists a vast palate of sustainability options ready for export. Scholars who have examined the mobility of sustainable development policies criticize that sustainability is not a simple formula that can be applied one-to-one from one place to another because, again, context matters: Local actors and institutions can intervene, modify, reinterpret policy formulations that obstruct policy importation and implementation (Temenos and McCann 2012; Carr 2013; McLean and Borén 2015).

The third relevant body of literature is the work that exposes the vast range of urban forms that exist today, and refers not only to the urban and suburban but also post suburban. Already, literature on suburbs (Burdack and Hesse 2007; Charmes and Keil 2015; Phelps and Wood 2011) revealed how urban spaces have diversified in recent decades, showing that processes of urbanization are changing and obliterating the classical town-country divide. Further, while scholars have identified a variety of suburb typologies such as “middle landscape” (Rowe 1991) or “Zwischenstadt” (Sieverts 2003), some observe now that the ways they are built, lived, and functionalized are so diverse that we can now speak of post suburbs. This signifies a move away from the idealized city center—and said relevant policy recipes—to “the explosion of the

city form” (Wachsmuth 2014, 75). In this context, Wachsmuth (2014) correctly challenges the “methodological cityism” of much sustainability policy:

the prevailing model of urban sustainability is too narrow. Although the social, economic and ecological issues behind sustainability problems are regional or global in scale, urban policy usually addresses single ecological issues in individual neighbourhoods. Focusing on dense cities and their affluent areas ignores social movements and their advocacy for quality-of-life issues such as housing and commuting, which have direct ecological consequences. Targeting specific districts ignores the often negative regional and global impacts of local environmental, or ‘greening’, improvements. (Wachsmuth et al. 2016)

This critique is echoed in other research focusing on Europe (Carr and McDonough 2016), and, as the reader will see, the critique applies to Luxembourg as well, which is a small sovereign nation under growth pressure, and part and parcel to new post-suburban forms that are profoundly dependent on international and cross-borders flows. This emerging agglomeration reveals new challenges that demand new approaches to sustainability.

Case Study

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg can be located tucked between Belgium, France, and Germany. With just over 2500 square kilometers, and housing just under 600,000 inhabitants, it can be classified as a small state. Recently, the nation has enjoyed a successful economic transition, achieved through downsizing its iron and steel industries and developing new economic niches. This transformation involved, first, attracting European institutions. Today, as the second European capital, Luxembourg hosts roughly 20 percent of the labor force that staff the administrative units of the European Union. Second, the Grand Duchy cultivated itself as a global financial center, now sitting in the top 20 financial markets in the world and fifth in Europe. The economic transition, third and most recently, involved marketing itself to global industries as a lucrative location to set up business. In this endeavor, Luxembourg focused on companies in the IT branch, attracting such companies as Amazon, PayPal, Google, and Skype/Microsoft, as well as companies in the space industry, expanding on its already resident *Société Européenne des Satellites* (SES) that operates a fleet of communication satellites. So far, Deep Space Industries and Planetary Resources, companies that concentrate on asteroid mining, have moved their European headquarters to the Grand Duchy. One

might say that this small state has given substantial attention to fortifying the economic pillar of sustainable development.

The net effect of these overall changes caused the inward migration of a multilingual and well-paid labor force as Luxembourg became a node of employment in the Greater Region. These changes also saw an increase in tax revenues that enabled the state to deliver on domestic welfare services and certain infrastructural investments. It is hotly debated, inside the nation, whether or not investments were appropriately targeted, but generally residents of Luxembourg have access to tuition-free public education, universal health and dental care, available unemployment and pension insurances, gratis transit for students and very inexpensive transit for everyone else (a year-long pass costs between 150 and 250 US dollars), new school buildings and classroom equipment/books, a new university, new roads, and public transit infrastructure. On the face of it, it would seem that this small state also gave substantial attention to fortifying—through investments in welfare—the social pillar of sustainable development as well.

The environmental pillar was also not entirely ignored either, particularly in the City of Luxembourg, the Grand Duchy's capital. New measures to address environmental issues include: (a) new bike lanes throughout the city, as well as bikes and electric car rental stations throughout the country; (b) improved building standards as all new buildings arriving on the market must be assessed and certified according to their energy efficiency; (c) climate change programming, as a number of municipalities in the Grand Duchy participate in the European Energy Awards system; and (d) expanded activist networks engaging in environmental awareness. Friends of the Earth Luxembourg (*Mouvement écologique, MECO*) is the most prominent address here. In recent years, it expanded its membership and programming and moved offices into a larger, state-of-the-art, ecologically friendly building in the heart of the City. Active in local environmental politics, MECO has become a central organization raising awareness of local environmental challenges such as uncontrolled development and biodiversity protection, alternative food production systems, supporting small businesses that sell environmental products (such as organic food or clothing production, environmentally friendly building, and building materials), and developing education programs to increase public outreach.

Luxembourg might be envied for these investments and changes, and admired for its apparent commitments to various dimensions of sustainable development. However, its development trajectory is characterized by several specificities that distinguish it from urban economic development elsewhere, some of which are far from sustainable. First, it took place in a rather short

period of time, generating by the mid-2000s the highest rate of relative resident population increases in the European Union (European Commission 2011), which put strain on existing infrastructures and institutions that were formerly designed for other purposes. Further, generating rather extreme daily fluctuations (relative to pre-existing capacities of the country), the City of Luxembourg's population nearly doubles in size as commuters from neighboring countries enter to work (Becker and Hesse 2010, 2). In 2016, Luxembourg housed more than 400,000 jobs, generating employment for both domestic residents and international commuters. The buying power of this new well-paid cohort combined with the benefits of an increased quality-of-life standard among existing residents boosted commerce and sent land prices through the roof, rendering it one of the most expensive places in Europe.

Second, these changes were not so much based on a continuous, endogenous development path but on the everlasting and necessary internationalization of the Grand Duchy: Strategic repositioning within international flows is nothing new in Luxembourg (!). Its steel industry was international, as were the systems of feudal land use under the monarchy before that. In the case of Luxembourg, its postwar protean strategies have been documented in its being at the forefront of building international relations such as Benelux, the EU, the Schengen Agreement, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), United Nations, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). And, amidst the 2016 quakes of European disintegration pushed by antidemocratic populist movements in France, England, Germany, and Italy, Luxembourg was a voice in favor of continued international cooperation and stability. Unable to supply the human and natural resources needed to manage itself as a self-sustaining nation, Luxembourg has always looked abroad to cooperate internationally: this is the norm of a small state, and this dependence on international relations renders it into a kind of protean body that needs to maintain the skills that enable it to change rapidly in response to continually changing international conditions. In this sense, a small state can arguably never become complacent in believing that it has achieved sustainability—if the term “sustainability” is to invoke a sense of improvement that will last over time.

Third, the specific social spatial organization of these developments had particular impacts. So far, strategic developments have concentrated in specific locations across the country (mostly near the capital city) such as the plateau of *Kirchberg* that houses the European institutions and roughly 50 of the 144 banks operating in the nation or the office islands at the periphery of Luxembourg City (*Cloche d'Or* or Munsbach). There is also the emerging

research city (*Cité des Sciences*) located on a former industrial site of ArcelorMittal on the southern border to France. These nodes, the traffic conduits that connect them to each other, and the bedroom communities both inside the nation and beyond the national border, constitute what one might call the Luxembourg agglomeration: functional areas of increasing urbanization and increasing pressure for further building for housing and commercial development.

Changes in the agglomeration have put pressure on land use throughout the country as well as in the border regions of neighboring countries. Extraordinary high land prices compounded by minimal property taxes have promoted speculation. This and the profitability of renting office and retail spaces over lodging have increased housing pressure (lowering housing vacancies). Recent transformations have thus had socially polarizing effects, squeezing low wage earners out of the housing market, and igniting discourses about the possible benefits of providing lower-priced housing and diversifying neighborhoods, which have so far not come to fruition. Renters and home buyers have not only been displaced from the Luxembourg agglomeration but also from the nation as a whole, as lower-skilled labor and pensioners prefer to either settle in, or emigrate to, the bordering regions of Germany, France, or Belgium. This cross-national migration exacerbated needs for further cooperation to address cross-border issues; however, so far governing mismatches have only been exposed as the four countries reveal their differing practices of decision-making at their respective levels of government (Affolderbach 2013; Vidal and Niedermeyer 2011). What might be a concern for a national government on one side of the border might be a concern for a local authority on the other, for example. Further, increased migratory flows have increased commuter traffic and raised respective pressures on infrastructure—that is still organized, in the first instance, around the private car—aggravating socioeconomic and environmental justice problems as lower wage earners face longer commutes and less attractive tax benefits if living in the border regions.

It is recognized that there is a need to study these processes and find solutions to surfacing sociopolitical and environmental problems, and in recent years an array of institutions have emerged that address respective issues. There is, as indicated above, the network of organizations and community groups that voice concerns about preservation of biodiversity of the region, promoting local organic agriculture or environmental education for children, or raising awareness of some of the adverse environmental effects of domestic urbanization. MECO could be classified among these. There are also the municipalities that address local problems. At the level of the central government, the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Infrastructures (*Ministère*

du Développement durable et des Infrastructures, MDDI) is another prominent address, as it houses the Departments for the Environment, Transport, and Planning (respectively, these are the *Département de l'Environnement*, the *Département des transports*, and the *Département de l'aménagement du territoire*). Architectural firms and some companies in the construction industry could also be identified, as these are the institutions that deal with land use throughout the Grand Duchy, defining, driving, and negotiating through the political environmental economy thereof. There are competing visions for the nation throughout this array of institutions, but the overall general consensus is that landscapes should be protected, transport should be optimized, building intensified (e.g., through the mobilization of unused building plots onto the market) and concentrating development at certain growth poles, and arrangements of private property should be preserved. In this way, it is predicted that sustainable development will be achieved.

Contradictions in these responses can be identified that have, to date, rendered them ineffective. First, even if the approaches were acutely aware of the cross-national challenges associated with ongoing economic development, solutions were ultimately oriented and confined to existing domestic institutional arrangements that, unchallenged and closed to critique, were unlikely to achieve serious change. For example, approaches were born out of and confined to the two-level government structure, whereby the central government oversees 106 municipalities. In the name of local municipal autonomy, municipalities were in charge of defining land use and zoning; however, because they were also sparsely populated, they usually lacked the expertise needed for urban issues (such as construction works for infrastructure), and consequently contracted such work out to the highest bidder. Development was thus de facto entirely driven by private property, where landowners, developers, and particular politicians were the gatekeepers. To coordinate—or, in the case of Luxembourg, more likely, to control—development, municipalities were required to submit land-use plans to the central government for approval. This process was often observed as slow and ineffective, as approvals are often returned with conflicting directives from different ministries, demanding revisions and resubmissions. This left municipalities in limbo about where and whether they could build. It also cultivated reduced supply, maintaining high land values and associated problems.

Second, policy responses were ultimately bound to the national territory. Many of the local green initiatives exemplify this. While there is a vibrant community of activists interested in local change (Doerr and Carr 2014), few address wider interwoven international networks and flows. For some, it may seem counterintuitive to address concerns that lay beyond the national border.

Such an approach may also, for good reason, not be possible because such interventions, if they do not outright contravene international agreements, demand complex intergovernmental cooperation. Yet, those challenges across the agglomeration of Luxembourg are, indeed, cross-border. Serious attempts to address sustainability issues thus demand a macroanalysis that goes beyond national boundaries.

Lessons Learned

If one were to Google an image of Luxembourg City, one would likely see a beautiful old town set upon a hilltop and spilling down the hillside over its stunning seventeenth-century fortress walls into the valley below: It is the imagery of an almost stereotypical medieval European city. Not unlike some of the images presented in Knox and Mayer's (2009) book on small town sustainability, one would likely also view narrow streets, small shops, pedestrian zones, and plenty of trees. Appealing as this representation is, it is misleading because the City of Luxembourg is part of a larger agglomeration with respective flows and challenges that reflect actual development trends, and these are overlooked. This is a cross-border, multipolar, urban space.

There are a couple of immediate lessons learned here. First, small is not necessarily beautiful. Luxembourg is beautiful in the aesthetic sense, but its current patterns of development are not sustainable. Second, recipes for sustainability such as formulas for population densities or prescriptions for particular kinds of infrastructure developments (such as public cycling or pedestrian zones) cannot simply be transferred from one place to another. In the case of the Grand Duchy, these measures have arguably increased urbanization pressures and made socioeconomic problems worse because they did not address institutional contradictions or because they were localists in their social spatial orientation. Third, sustainability solutions need to address actual functional pathways and networked flows. That is, they need to address the current modes of social spatial urban production. The agglomeration of Luxembourg can be understood in light of recent scholarship that has reflected on post-suburban space (Charmes and Keil 2015; Phelps and Wood 2011). Just as Keil and Addie (2015) argued that the morphologies of Toronto and Chicago defy conventional city-suburbs nomenclatures, so too does the agglomeration of Luxembourg—a cross-border space of flows, spanning from island developments in and near the City of Luxembourg and spreading into France, Germany, and Belgium. This is a new kind of urban space, indicative of contemporary European post-suburbanization processes that are both

place-specific and path dependent. Developments across the agglomeration targeted higher-income labor cohorts leaving lower-income cohorts to settle in neighboring countries. Luxembourg, thus, not only provides the international literature with a new post-suburbia to struggle with, it also signals different kinds of sustainability challenges that require innovative approaches.

Challenges and Barriers

Design alone is not enough. Technical one-fix solutions to sustainability do not exist. Recipes for urban sustainability are likely to be misguided. Such claims seem bold in an era where urban transformation in Europe is led by profit-seeking development, and serious consideration for sustainability problems seems more urgent than ever. Yet, the case of Luxembourg sheds light on this because it shows that current sustainable development orthodoxies are insufficient. What is urgently needed is an examination of the winners and losers in development approaches: Who has financial power? Who profits? What are the resistance factors in fostering change? How are sociopolitical and economic dynamics spatially arranged? These questions, and others like them, address actors and institutions and scrutinize the range of contradictions and dilemmas therein.

With respect to Luxembourg, Hesse (2016) exposed the power dynamics involved in urban and regional sustainability planning: As a small state, Luxembourg developed itself as a political-economic niche embedded in wider networked international flows. Normative territorially bounded, place-based, sustainability policies that overlooked the realities of increasing global connectedness in such enclave spaces are unlikely to be effective. In this chapter, we assessed Luxembourg as a post-suburban agglomeration and arrived at similar conclusions. Overcoming these barriers ought to be put in the foreground. These include imagining cross-border solutions, moving beyond classic environmental orthodoxies such as densification, bringing new sets of stakeholders into the discussion (particularly disadvantaged groups), keeping pace with new conceptions of urban space, finding new models of economic organization, and addressing the underlying questions of how things might be improved in the coming decades. The answers to these questions are not found in sustainable development recipes, and the answers will vary depending on the context. These are the kinds of barriers that need to be addressed in order for there to be greater success toward sustainability.

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