

SCATTER project concludes with recommendations to combat urban sprawl

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At the final seminar of the SCATTER (sprawling cities and transport: from evaluation to recommendations) project, financed under the Fifth Framework Programme (FP5), four policy measures were presented to counteract the negative consequences of urban sprawl.

These include: fiscal measures to control land use by putting a tax on suburban residential developments as well as offices; road pricing; transport pricing measures and measures to control housing prices and to promote the development of intermediate type housing.

Urban sprawl is widespread in Europe. To deal with the growing damage caused by this phenomenon in terms of congestion, air pollution and energy consumption, many European cities are implementing or developing suburban public transport services such as heavy or light rail.

However, there is a risk that by improving accessibility, suburban public transport services create an incentive for a new wave of urban sprawl. Therefore, 'the objective of the SCATTER project,' explained Sylvie Gayda, the project coordinator, 'is to verify that new transport policies do not start a new set of urban sprawl and if they do, propose accompanying measures to counteract the negative impact.'

The SCATTER project, which ended on 30 September and brought together eight partners from six European countries, examined six European case studies, namely Brussels, Bristol, Rennes, Milan, Stuttgart, and Helsinki, and formulated a set of recommendations based on their observations.

'We are increasingly deconcentrating from cities,' explained Mike Beatty from University College London. 'The phenomenon of urban growth is an age-old concept and will never stop. Urban sprawl, however, is more specific than growth. It is defined as uncoordinated growth; the expansion of a community without concern for consequences or environmental impact,' added Professor Beatty.

Sprawl is seen as despoiling the countryside, said Professor Beatty, and is also costly for society as a whole with high infrastructure and operating costs. Other negative impacts of urban sprawl include the lengthening of travel distances between home and work, the increased use of cars, more congestion on radial roads, more emissions, such as greenhouse gases and pollutants, social segregation, the loss of high value open space and agricultural land, and the decrease of biodiversity, added Ms Gayda.

To reduce the impact of urban sprawl, the project partners therefore suggested four main policy measures.

The first measure is aimed at controlling land use and includes a tax on suburban residential development (the so-called impact fee in the US), accompanied by fiscal reductions in urban areas. Furthermore, a tax on offices would be introduced whereby an annual impact fee per employee would be levied on offices located in areas poorly served by public transport.

The road pricing measure would increase the cost of car use through the introduction of a congestion tax, whereby cars used in a congestion area during congestion time would have to pay a toll.

The third measure would involve lowering public transport fares. However, explained the partners, for such a measure to have an attractive impact, it is important that the reduction only applies to the city centre to prevent urban sprawl.

The last proposed measure is the control of housing prices by local authorities through land use reduction and land price regulations. This concept, called land banking, is an example of public-private partnership (authorities negotiate with developers and farmers) and is already well developed in Rennes. In parallel to this measure, intermediate type housing, halfway between a collective building and single-family housing, should be encouraged.

'The combination of all measures works well,' explained Kari Lautso, from LT Consultants in Finland, who presented the Helsinki case study. 'They improve all dimensions of sustainability and work efficiently against urban sprawl.'

'It is important to combine policies in a multisectoral strategy,' added Ms Gayda. Symbolic actions, such as soft measures must be implemented to raise awareness, create a common culture and encourage inter-institution cooperation,' she said.

'With a good combination of policies it is possible to significantly reduce the amount of CO2 emissions' concluded Eric Ponthieu, the European Commission official overseeing the project. 'At a time when the Commission is developing a post-Kyoto policy, this is significant.'

The European Commission is currently considering whether to propose introducing obligatory measures for cities above a certain size to develop sustainable urban plans.

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