

Summary:

Drivers behind urban sprawl in Europe

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A literature review has been undertaken to identify the driving forces behind urban sprawl in Europe. The drivers have been classified into four categories: economy, society, transport, and policy and regulatory framework. While the drivers behind urban sprawl are several, it is difficult to determine which forces that are the most important. This is so because drivers are context dependent and can vary between regions and countries. Furthermore, drivers are often closely connected, and can interact with each other.

Background

Considerable amounts of research have been done on the relationship between spatial structure and transport. In summary, studies have shown that residents in centers have shorter trips and lower car use. The prescription has therefore been that cities' spatial development should be concentrated around existing centers. Urban sprawl may be the opposite of such a development. Consequently, it is of interest to understand the driving forces behind urban sprawl, in particular because this aspect might have received less attention than the relationship between spatial structure and transport. The study has been funded the City of Oslo and Akershus County Council.

No common definition

Despite the fact that there is considerable literature on this subject, there is no common definition of urban sprawl. In this respect there are clear parallels to the sustainability concept. A common denominator for the majority of the definitions is, however, that urban sprawl is characterized as low-density development and inefficient use of land. A simple definition is *excessive spatial growth*. Cities must grow to accommodate a growing population, but may use more space than is deemed acceptable or reasonable. Land use is therefore often not optimal, since it can be more concentrated and compact.

Economy

Local and international economic conditions can play a crucial role with regard to urban sprawl. On a general level, restructuring of the economy contribute to the centralization of the population. Major cities and regions will serve as important driving forces behind the knowledge economy as the Lisbon strategy sets out. EU policies will also contribute to urban sprawl. Infrastructure investment is considered as an important instrument promoting EU's cohesion policy and the

common market. EU countries are increasingly integrated into a common economy. Good accessibility is therefore necessary for the transportation of both goods and passengers.

Economic factors, such as competition between cities, land prices and purchasing power and market failure, are also driving forces behind urban sprawl. For instance, centralization may contribute to increased pressure on housing and housing prices, and they are usually highest in the center. Thus, it can be cheaper to purchase apartments that are located in areas characterized by lower density. It is also necessary to point out that competition between cities can be an important driving force. The literature review shows several examples in Europe where this has been a challenge. Local governance authorities want to attract new residents and businesses to generate tax revenue. Municipalities can therefore facilitate new areas and use tax incentives to increase demand from households and economic activities.

Societal factors

Socioeconomic factors can affect land development. An important driving force behind urban sprawl may be that there is a tendency that people want to move out of the inner city to more rural areas outside of urban areas. This applies particularly to young couples with children. They want to establish themselves in more rural residential areas with large lots and access to green areas. This may partly be because housing prices are lower outside the urban areas, and that families can fulfill their desire for a bigger house than they would be able to afford in the city, as well as access to gardens or green areas in relation to housing. Thus, it may be difficult to reduce urban sprawl. Cultural and individual factors may therefore be a crucial driving force. Urban sprawl can also be linked to a historic overall economic growth in Europe. Settling near green areas and larger homes has become affordable. Not least, economic growth may be a prerequisite for the acquisition of private cars, something which families may see as a necessity when living outside city centers.

Transportation

Transportation related factors are prerequisites behind urban sprawl. Train, metro, bus and car have provided greater freedom and opportunities with regard to localization of individuals, businesses and industry. Technological improvements and falling transport costs have made it possible for businesses and industries to locate away from transport hubs such as railway stations and ports. Moreover, it has become possible to travel longer distances within the same travel time. Therefore, one can live farther away from the center or the workplace without increased travel time. In this regard, improvements related to the flexibility and development in ICT may also be a driving force. Ability to work while commuting and compensation for travel time as part of work time, may reinforce incentives to live further away from centers and place fewer restrictions on mobility. These factors vary between European countries.

Policy and regulatory framework

The policy and regulatory framework plays a major role when it comes to driving forces behind urban sprawl. This also applies when it comes to controlling and reducing urban sprawl. The potential for controlling land development depending on many factors, it can be difficult to make general observations. Yet, there are differences across Europe in terms of the potential to control land development. One hypothesis is precisely that countries with a strong control over land use policy, and with less dispersed and fragmented governance system, have the best potential for managing and planning land developments. It is also important to point out that cities or municipalities may promote urban sprawl, because it is in their interest to do so. Some municipalities may facilitate urban sprawl to attract new inhabitants and increase the population.

In the end, while a variety of factors may function as driving forces behind urban sprawl, it is difficult to determine which factors are the most important. One reason for this is that driving forces are context dependent and vary between cities, regions and countries. Moreover, the driving forces are closely linked, and may interact strongly with each other.