

# REDEFINITION OF TERRITORIAL SCALES AND SPATIAL PLANNING IN DENMARK

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## ABSTRACT

The spatial planning system in Denmark has traditionally been known for its 'comprehensive-integrated' appeal characterized by a 'formal' rationality embedded within its systematic hierarchy of plans and institutions from national to local levels. In Europe, the purpose of planning systems of this kind has been to achieve 'spatial coherence' between levels of government and across territorial scales through the coordination and integration of policy sectors (horizontally) as well as jurisdictions and planning policies (vertically) shaping the management and articulation of spatial change. However, the Danish spatial planning system has been exposed to profound reorientations in recent years, as illustrated by the radical modification of its scope, its structure as well as its institutional and policy mechanisms. In the case of Denmark, a structural reform implemented in 2007 that changed the country's political geography and its existing intergovernmental arrangements hence led to: i) the downward rescaling (from regional to municipal levels) of most functions and responsibilities related to spatial planning; ii) the upward rescaling (from metropolitan to national level) of spatial planning functions associated with the Metropolitan Region of Copenhagen; and iii) the revocation of regional planning as well as the institutional dismantling of the metropolitan level.

Based on these series of changes, this paper aims at elucidating how different governments in power over the last 20 years have interpreted the planning system based on the adoption and adaptation of specific strategies (legal and/or spatial) that seek to articulate the different levels that comprise the planning system in one way or another. The impact that stems from the implementation of these strategies (whether they also remain as speculations or intentions) is that there is an increasing tendency to indirectly redefine conventional territorial scales. In order to depict such redefinition, this paper attempts to carry out an analysis of: i) the strategic spatial role attributed to each level of planning; ii) how each territorial scale is redefined as a result of the changing spatial relationships occurring between the planning levels.

**Key words:** spatial planning; planning system; territorial scale; spatial rescaling; structural reform.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Spatial planning in Denmark has been exposed to important reorientations over the course of the past two decades. The comprehensive character associated with plans and policies and at different administrative levels has notably shifted after the implementation of a structural reform that changed the country's geopolitical subdivisions since 2007. Based on the principle of framework control, comprehensive spatial planning was based on the idea of achieving a high degree of cohesiveness and synchronisation amongst policy instruments and institutions across different levels of planning administration. Amongst the many implications of such reform, however, the *county* (regional) and *metropolitan* levels of planning administration were repealed and their physical (land-use) planning functions and responsibilities re-scaled to municipal and national levels, respectively.

To understand the re-scaling implications as well as the increasing differentiation of Danish spatial planning across levels of planning administration, there is a need to inspect the grounds and motivations behind the evolving conceptions of scale and representations of space portrayed in diverse plans. In doing so, the paper's aim is twofold: to unveil the strategic roles of planning policies and their actual interrelationships across different levels of planning administration, and to understand the meaning behind the redefinition of territorial scales that stems from these interrelationships.

Following this brief introduction, the paper is subdivided in four sections and a final discussion. First, the paper presents a theoretical overview that addresses the strategic roles of planning and the treatment of scale from alternative spatial development perspectives based on the transition from physical, land-use planning to strategic spatial planning. Second, the paper provides an overview of the Danish planning system covering its legalistic tradition, its principles and objectives and its most recent reorientations. The paper then moves on to examine the strategic roles of planning instruments and their linkage across levels of government. Based on this assessment, the paper lastly discusses the redefinition of territorial scales and highlights the planning implications emerging from such understanding.

The paper builds on the analysis of plans and policies prepared at different levels of planning administration in Denmark. The examination of policy documents includes national planning reports, the metropolitan directive for Greater Copenhagen, the recently repealed regional spatial development plans, and municipal strategic spatial plans. Such analysis has been supplemented by semi-structured interviews conducted with key policymakers and planning actors involved in plan and strategy-making processes over the course of the past two decades.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As a policy field acting within and across different administrative levels, spatial planning has been subjected to continuous shifts resulting in an array of policy adaptations and institutional forms. A relevant shift relates with how spatial planning has moved away from its innately regulatory scope towards adopting *strategic* roles. The "strategic turn" that emerged during the 1990s and that continues to evolve to present date portrays spatial planning as an innovative place-making activity based on relational decision-making processes (Healey et. al., 1997; Albrechts et al., 2003; Healey, 2007). As Healey puts it (2004, p. 46), *strategic spatial planning* can be understood as "...self-conscious collective efforts to re-imagine a city, urban region or wider territory and to translate the result into priorities for area investment, conservation measures, strategic infrastructure investments and principles of land use regulation..." While this reorientation has been most evident insofar as how city-regions or metropolitan areas could potentially develop, the range of plans influenced by strategic spatial logics is wide and can cover different levels of planning.

Until the late 1980s, spatial plans at different levels centred on 'Euclidean' concepts (Friedmann, 1993), such as central place hierarchies, urban settlement patterns, physical proximity or commuting patterns between cities. As argued by Healey (2004), this rather essentialist conception of space as a primary social ordering principle (Graham & Healey, 1999) has been challenged by the emergence of a relational conception often endorsed by the spatial relations of territories as illustrated by strategic spatial planning 'episodes' (Healey, 2004; 2006). In this sense, strategic plans are prepared based on *ad hoc* spatial concepts (e.g. Fischler, 1995; van Duinen, 2004; Dühr, 2007) that tend to treat territorial

scales differently and thereby redefine them. In practice, the strategic role of spatial plans emerges, amongst other cases, when trying to make urban regions more competitive or in creating territorial relationships characterised by complex urban and regional dynamics and territorial governance processes (Healey, 2004; 2006).

Shifts regarding the nature of spatial planning not only imply that the roles of this policy domain in shaping spatial development become increasingly differentiated, but also that territorial scales are continually under transformation between dynamics of territorial stabilization and destabilization (Herod, 2011). Nested hierarchies (i.e. urban, municipal, regional and national), which portray discrete, permanent and fixed scales of conventional planning systems, tend to dispute on-going processes of spatial and historical transformations. Territorial dynamics thereby demand deeper reflection on strategic spatial planning exercises that do not match fixed administrative jurisdictions.

### **3. THE DANISH PLANNING SYSTEM**

#### **Legal framework**

The Danish Planning Act came into force in 1992 based on the planning reform adopted in the 1970s (Ministry of the Environment, 1992). The Planning Act is intended to ensure *appropriate development* in the whole country based on overall planning and economic considerations that meet the interests of society with respect to land use, while geared towards protecting nature and the environment (Ministry of the Environment, 2007a). As of 2014, the Danish spatial planning system delegates *ad hoc* authority, competence and responsibility to both national and local levels. As a whole, the national planning policy framework is constituted by planning reports and guidelines, binding planning directives, and intervention in municipal planning for selective themes and projects of international, national, regional and local interest.

#### **Danish spatial planning: Brief overview**

The comprehensive-integrated tradition of planning systems and policies is mainly concerned with the Scandinavian legal family. This type of systems explicitly seeks to deliver a certain degree of horizontal and vertical integration of policies across sectors and jurisdictions (CEC, 1997). As such, the comprehensive-integrated tradition aims to achieve spatial coordination through a hierarchy of plans put forward by 'nested' levels of planning administration from national to local.

In Denmark, the birth of comprehensive-integrated planning should be understood as a direct response to the significant socio-spatial challenges that resulted from the country's industrial development and rapid economic growth during the postwar era. Of utmost relevance was the establishment of a so-called 'urban pattern' based on central place theory advanced by national and regional plans during the 1970s and 1980s, which yielded hierarchical spatial arrangements within individual counties. This enabled a more even spatial distribution of demography, labour market and economic growth, which contributed to secure more equal socio-economic development throughout the whole country.

Since the early 1990s, however, the rationale, aims, contents and development orientations of spatial planning shifted as a result of political and economic driving forces prompted by supra-national and national policy interventions as well as the Planning Act's shift from 'equal' to 'appropriate development' in 1992 (Galland, 2012a). While national and regional plans before this major shift were regarded as a societal need and as an orchestrated effort fostering the 'ordered' expansion of a city hierarchy, the contents of national plans placed more emphasis on spatial development considerations of specific city-regions while the land-use focus of regional plans was given up with as the regional level would eventually be revoked by the structural reform, which is described below.

#### **Structural reform in 2007**

A reform of local government structure was implemented by a liberal-conservative coalition government in 2007, which had a significant impact on the Danish planning system. The reform modified the geographies of inter-governmental arrangements in Denmark by merging 275 municipalities into 98 larger units and by abolishing 14 counties. The territorial and administrative restructuring that this structural reform brought about generated a major redistribution of tasks and

responsibilities between levels of government and transformed the comprehensive-integrated rationale that formerly characterised the Danish planning system.

As the territorial size of administrative units was deemed inappropriate in light of overlapping responsibilities and functions between municipalities, the structural reform was geared towards efficiency considerations and managerial effectiveness, but no recommendations in terms of the spatial restructuring of the territory were delivered. This meant that territorial considerations regarding conventional peripheral problems, functional relationships (mobility and commuting patterns) between municipalities or other geographical appraisals were largely overlooked (Jørgensen, 2004).

### **Re-scaling of planning tasks and responsibilities**

The 2007 structural reform transformed the Danish planning system from its traditional multi-tier configuration to a double-tier structure comprised by national and municipal planning. To a great extent, this shift eradicated the hierarchy of plans formerly dictated by the principle of framework control.

The structural reform privileged municipalities by allocating them a large number of physical planning tasks and responsibilities formerly assumed by the counties. Several regional planning provisions related with land-use were thus repealed and transferred to municipalities, which upheld the right to undertake and decide upon physical planning in urban areas and the countryside. In doing so, the Planning Act also gave the municipalities the necessary autonomy to designate urban zones, locate transport facilities, and manage aspects concerned with agriculture, cultural and historical heritage, amongst others (Ministry of the Environment, 2007).

The structural reform similarly transferred planning controls to the national level, including the spatial planning for Greater Copenhagen. National planning became reinforced in relation with its capacity to intervene in municipal planning affairs and projects of national and/or regional relevance through the right of veto. Based on the above redistribution of tasks at municipal and national levels, the 2007 structural reform could be regarded as a 'centralised-decentralisation' or a recentralisation of government (Andersen, 2008).

The abolition of the county level was 'filled-in' by the formation of five regions, which were mainly created for health care administration purposes although with a parallel responsibility of preparing 'visionary' regional spatial development plans. Before 2007, regional (land-use) plans had been imperative not only as a binding instrument for municipal plans with sectoral interests and objectives, but also as a conciliatory tool to balance sectoral considerations. Regional planning processes were aimed at balancing conflicting interests and coordinating objectives related with *inter alia* traffic services (such as harbours, railways and roads) and siting of large-scale facilities (e.g. solid-waste treatment plants, sewage disposal sites, petrochemical plants and even windmill parks).

In sum, the series of policy and institutional shifts suggest that the 2007 structural reform triggered the 'softening' of the principle of framework control, which is suggestive of decreased harmonisation and coherence between the scope of plans and policies at different levels of planning administration. This overall restructuring of the spatial planning system holds several implications not only as regards the 'strategic role' that each level of planning administration currently plays, but also as to how territorial scales are redefined as a result of the spatial interrelation between levels of planning. These implications are described in the following sections.

## **4. STRATEGIC ROLES OF PLANNING INSTRUMENTS AND THEIR ARTICULATION ACROSS LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT**

The Danish national planning policy framework for comprehensive spatial planning and land-use decision-making is constituted by planning reports, binding regulations, guidelines and intervention in municipal planning for themes and projects of international, national, regional and local interest.

The strategic role of the **national planning report** is to set out overall spatial policies and objectives after each government election. It focuses on providing advisory guidance and recommendations to lower levels of government on spatial development matters, often through the use of varying spatial concepts. The reports are prepared by the Nature Agency (a body within the Ministry of the Environment) based on cooperation with other relevant ministries. The contents and discourses associated with these reports, which have treated territorial scales differently since 1997, show that

national-level plans adopts distinctive strategic roles and orientations in promoting spatial development, several of them influenced by European spatial concepts such as *polycentricity*, *balanced spatial structure*, *urban networks*, *dynamic zones of integration*, and so forth. In contrast, however, the latest national planning report (2013) articulates a less strategic spatial approach based on *ad hoc* spatial analyses (mainly commuting patterns) showing that growth concentrates within city-regions located along the national highway system, the so-called big-H (Ministry of the Environment, 2013). The report also adopts a 'green growth' discourse in relation to climate and the environment. From the outset, the report does not provide any strategic spatial direction nor it addresses coordination challenges at inter-municipal and regional levels.

The Ministry of the Environment is also responsible of generating a so-called *Overview of national interests on municipal planning* [*Oversigt over statslige interesser i kommuneplanlægning*] that outlines the aims and requirements of the government with respect to municipal planning (Ministry of the Environment, 2011). The overview includes aspects concerned with urban development (including special considerations for Greater Copenhagen), energy supply, green transport, green growth, tourism and recreation, use of rural areas and aspects of nature protection. Published every fourth year, such *Overview* should be understood as the main national planning instrument that municipalities should abide by to avoid veto of municipal plan proposals.

Furthermore, national directives are prepared and adopted by the Ministry of the Environment which set out legal provisions on specific issues of national interest, e.g. determining the path for natural gas pipelines, the siting of wind turbines and electrical transmission lines, etc. Following the re-scaling of metropolitan planning to the national level, a land-use planning directive for Greater Copenhagen establishes a spatial framework for the whole metropolitan region by securing future urban development in accordance with the principle of station proximity (Ministry of the Environment, 2007c).

At the regional level, the so-called **regional spatial development plans (RSDPs)** aimed to foster growth in close connection with business development. The RSDPs differed notably from the former physical, land-use regional plans, as their visionary scope lacks the 'spatial' component, which thus limits them to provide (aspatial) guidance for business growth possibilities rather than directing spatial change. RSDPs focus on potential regional strengths within diverse sectorial areas and are thus meant to ensure cohesion with sectorial plans and strategies, namely business development, employment, Local Agenda 21, and education and culture. However, RSDPs have turned out to fail as their implementation capacities became largely hindered by municipal coalitions outside the scope of the formal planning system (Galland, 2012b). Regional planning provisions and RSDPs themselves were finally repealed from the Planning Act in 2014.

The **municipal plan** is the main political instrument of the council for development control and serves as a strategy for social and economic development as well as environmental improvement. The plan combines political objectives, land use guidelines and a framework for the contents of local plans for individual parts of the municipal jurisdiction. Altogether, the municipal plan provides the linkage between national planning interests and detailed local plans. Municipal plans cannot conflict with national planning directives, water resource plans, European directives (e.g. Natura 2000 and actions plans) and until very recently, with the description of desired future development put forward by the RSDPs.

Figure 1. The spatial planning policy framework in Denmark.

Policy institutions			Policy instruments		
Level	Planning authority	Number of inhabitants	Type of plan or instrument	Description	Legal effect
<b>National</b>	Ministry of the Environment, Nature Agency	5.58 million	<b>National planning report</b>	National visions regarding functional physical development	Advisory guidelines and recommendations
			<b>Overview of national interests regarding municipal plans</b>	National interests arising from legislation, action plans, sector plans and agreements between national authorities	Binding for local authorities. Right to veto municipal plan proposals when contradicting national interests
			<b>National planning directives</b>	Maps and legal provisions /circulars	Binding for local authorities
<b>Regional</b>	5 administrative regions	~ 1,000,000 (wide deviations)	Regional spatial development plans ( <i>repealed in 2014</i> )	Advisory and visionary plans	Binding for local authorities ( <i>until February 2014</i> )
<b>Local</b>	98 municipal councils	~ 30,000 (wide deviations)	<b>Municipal plans</b>	Policies, maps and land-use regulations	Binding for local authorities
			<b>Local plans</b>	Maps and detailed legal land-use regulations	Binding for landowners

## 5. REDEFINITION OF TERRITORIAL SCALES

The **national scale** has been defined and redefined in accordance with both positivistic and relational logics. Before the 1990s, the national scale was conceived as a space of hierarchical central places defined by urban settlement patterns. Such positivistic logic contrasts with the relational logic of the post-1990s, which redefined the national scale in terms of concentric urban networks and one international metropolis (Copenhagen-Malmö) (Ministry of Environment and Energy, 1997; 2000). In 2006, the national scale was strategically defined according to a “balanced spatial structure” comprised of two metropolitan regions (Greater Copenhagen and Eastern Jutland) and one commuting region (Zealand) (Ministry of the Environment, 2006). The national scale in this report, at the same time, is re-defined in terms of the **metropolitan scale**, which is influenced by spatial concepts drawn from the European Spatial Development Perspective (CSD, 1999). In this sense, Greater Copenhagen and the Øresund Region are portrayed as one metropolitan region shaped as a “dynamic zone of integration” alongside a commuting hinterland (Zealand), and Eastern Jutland is depicted as a “growth corridor” representing a functional conurbation defined by a well-connected urban structure and a coherent labour market.

From the inception of regional planning in Denmark until the mid-2000s, the **regional scale** was perceived in relation with the administrative level of the county, and planned accordingly in terms of land-use. With the rescaling of regional (land-use) planning responsibilities after the structural reform, regional (development) planning has taken place in new spaces of governance characterised by a fragmented governance landscape. Different processes of ‘filling in’ entailed the creation of ‘soft spaces’ of planning and governance that emerged at the regional and metropolitan levels. For instance, in 2006 the Ministry of the Environment advanced initiatives to create partnership projects between municipal councils, regional councils, and the state on the future development of the two metropolitan regions abovementioned. The intention behind promoting such governance arrangements was mainly intended to integrate transport challenges and urban development within the contours of these suggested functional conurbations. The promotion of these initiatives also revealed the ministry’s lack of reliance on the administrative regions as the suitable level at which spatial planning strategies should be formulated. Instead, soft spaces were advocated to stimulate bottom-up initiatives to work across policy sectors and different administrative levels.

Although not regarded with sufficient attention by planning stakeholder in previous decades, the **city-region scale** is a topic under ever increasing scrutiny in Denmark, which is currently being politically promoted by the 6 largest cities in the country. Just recently, the mayors of the 6 largest cities (Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, Odense, Randers and Esbjerg) jointly objected the latest national planning report (2013), which seemingly downplays the strategic spatial relevance of the city-region scale. It remains to be seen whether the city-region scale will end up differ from or will rather adapt to the actual municipal scale that these cities belong to.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The above description and assessment pertaining the strategic roles of spatial planning instruments and the consequent and evolving redefinition of territorial scales suggests that, in more recent years, there has been somewhat lessened spatial reflection and coherence across policies put forward at higher levels of planning administration. In this sense, national-level planning has become less strategic (and partially positivistic and sectorial) while regional-level planning centred on promoting spaceless growth-oriented strategies to facilitate regional development (from 2007 to 2014) after the demise of regional physical planning. The 1990s transition towards strategic spatial planning in Denmark also shows that regulatory-led planning instruments stay put, arguably as an attempt to control and counterbalance competitiveness-related strategies and agendas that demand the redefinition of territorial scales. This situation shows that spatial planning can simultaneously play steering and strategic roles when addressing territorial development.

Danish spatial planning seems to have stepped away from the original comprehensive-integrated tradition. The institutional set-up of the Danish spatial planning system that depicted territorial synchrony has become significantly altered in light of the recent rescaling of planning tasks and responsibilities. The gradual loss of spatial consciousness displayed by national and regional plans and strategies thus explain why there is current lack of strategic spatial reasoning (Galland & Enemark, 2013), which evidently reduces the possibility for spatial planning to have a say in present and future spatial decision-making processes. In contrast with its predecessor, the current Danish planning system is less influential when attempting to make plans matter. However, there is a potential to redefine territorial scales in the near future, particularly the *city-region*, although it remains to be seen whether this scale is defined according to traditional administrative borders (the municipal level), functional areas (that consider spatial relations between cities and the hinterland), formal (vertical, horizontal and sectorial) collaborations, or informal (practical) collaborations of city-regional planning.

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