

Beyond the City Limits—Smart Suburban Regions in Austria



Nina Svanda and Petra Hirschler

Abstract The majority of the population in Austria lives and interacts in (sub)urban regions. Their areas of activity cross the borders of cities, municipalities, and countries. The urban regions consist of the core city and the catchment areas, and the balance and the equilibrium between the city and its surroundings is very important for sustainable spatial development. The size of the urban regions in Austria ranges from small- and medium-sized regions to polycentric agglomerations and the metropolis of Vienna. Nevertheless, urban regions are currently not sufficiently defined by type of region nor established at the planning or action level among political and administrative stakeholders. One of the reasons is that urban regions as functional spaces with flexible borders extend beyond political and administrative borders. Due to this lack of clarity with respect to political responsibility for urban regions, it is often difficult to find support for urban–regional cooperation on the political level. The “Agenda for Urban Regions in Austria” is a first milestone to implement an Austrian policy for its urban regions. It identifies measures for regional actors and especially policymakers on different administrative levels to remain urban regions sustainable in the future and to encourage and support collaboration. Urban regions have to master challenges in many different fields covering the entire spectrum of spatial development. They have to take actions to improve mobility and accessibility across city borders, to secure free space for everyone by a prudent use of free space and natural resources and to support diversity and cohesion to provide space for the diversity of lifestyles. A very important action is the sustainable development of settlements and business locations through improved interaction of cities and municipalities within urban regions to achieve more for less investment. One of the key points is that urban regions practice governance to support cooperation among their actors. The steering and coordination of the spatial development in urban regions (i.e., the governance) affects not only various actors in urban regions but also the coordination between federal government, provinces, municipalities, and

N. Svanda (✉) · P. Hirschler

Institute of Spatial Planning, Vienna University of Technology, Karlsplatz 13, 1040 Wien, Austria
e-mail: nina.svanda@tuwien.ac.at

P. Hirschler

e-mail: petra.hirschler@tuwien.ac.at

cities. With the establishment of governance structures in urban regions, steering and coordination areas will be adjusted to functional areas. In this way, it is possible to solve spatial challenges jointly, to bundle resources and to raise the willingness to cooperate among the actors in urban regions.

Keywords Urban regions · Governance · Collaboration · Smart regions · Integrated approach

1 Introduction and Method

Urban agglomerations are key drivers of regional development. In the year 2010, the global level of urbanization reached more than 50%. In Europe more than 70% of the populations live in urban regions. As a result, urban agglomerations face great challenges such as, for example, urban sprawl, high consumption of resources, and dense traffic flows. Imbalances within and between urban agglomerations occur or even grow, e.g., in the field of employment and/or demographic structure (inter- and intraregional polarization). These trends often result in disparate fiscal developments between the core cities and their surrounding municipalities.

While the forces impacting the growth of cities have changed dramatically in many parts of the world, planning systems have changed only very little. Steering those growing or shrinking agglomerations with the existing planning tools needs to be revisited for urban and regional planning, especially in the field of shopping malls, subsidized housing, or cooperation among provinces.

The spectrum of Austrian agglomerations is broad. It reaches from small- to medium-sized urban agglomerations with differing economic structures (e.g., urban services, industrial structure, and touristic structure) to polycentric agglomerations, as well as the metropolitan region Vienna (see Fig. 1).

The study “Spatial Development in Austrian Urban Agglomerations: Need for Action and Steering Options” (Hamedinger et al. 2009) dealt with selected Austrian regions. It was conducted by the Department of Spatial Development, Infrastructure and Environmental Planning of the Vienna University of Technology in 2007–2008. Based on analysis of the spatial development in functional urban areas, the work focused on various aspects like, e.g., innovative approaches for steering spatial development in urban agglomerations and recommendations for actions to meet the different challenges of city-regions.

The study followed the approach of interactive research including participation, grounded in experience and action-oriented approaches. Central features are the collaborative dialogue between researchers and research participants and a common understanding of research as a joint learning process (Astleitner and Hamedinger 2003). The aim was to develop practical knowledge (requirements for action) and recommendations for action. A broad range of procedures and structures for the steering and coordination of the development in urban agglomerations have been analyzed, leading with the result that—compared to classical direct “hard”

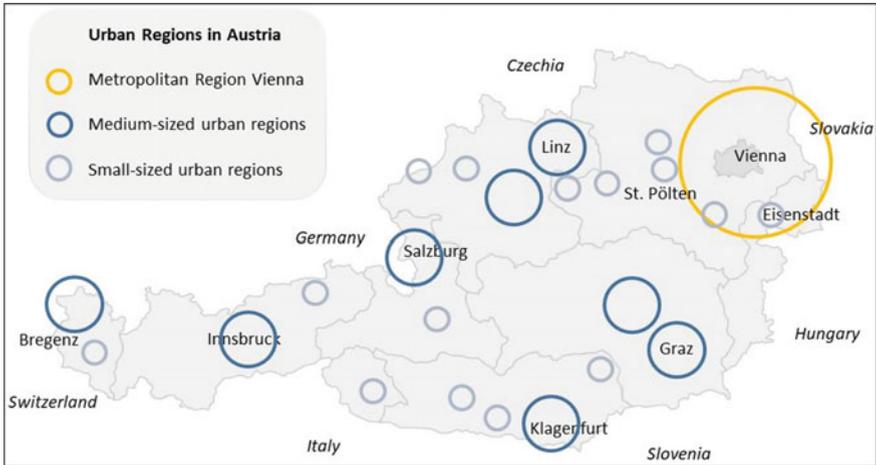


Fig. 1 Urban agglomerations in Austria

steering instruments—the significance (effectiveness) of more communicative and cooperative targeted “soft” steering instruments is evident.

Over recent years, these soft instruments especially have gained more and more importance—one guiding principle related to these cooperation models in Austria is voluntariness. The increased demand for coordination in urban agglomerations especially requires cooperative methods. Regional governance is based on concepts of cooperation and negotiation (Pütz 2004), aiming at a specific combination of various steering instruments (direct and indirect), as well as steering mechanisms (e.g., hierarchy, networks, and markets). The crucial point is always to come to a common answer to the competing interests of the involved actors. Therefore, incentive schemes are essential elements of regional governance to enable and support regional cooperation.

With the adoption of the Austrian Spatial Development Concept (ÖREK 2011),¹ the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) created a strategic framework for action for spatial development in Austria. In the ÖREK 2011, the “Development of an Agglomeration Policy for Austria” is defined as one of 14 actions. For the first time, spatial development of agglomerations made it to the front stage, while earlier the most important fields of intervention were lagging regions.

The majority of urban regions are growing and significant settlement entities, but nevertheless they still are not political or legal entities. Therefore, it is important to think about how urban regions can be demarcated, how they can take joint stances and gain legal status, as well as how the functional distribution of tasks within an urban region can be optimized.

¹The Austrian Spatial Development Concept has been elaborated since 1981 every ten years. As the federal level has no spatial planning competence, it is a self-binding document adopted by the provinces, ministries and social partners.

The new positioning of urban regions embedded in new models of regional governance and of revenue sharing has the goal of achieving a fair balance of interests between core city and catchment areas and includes: rule-based and cooperative developments in traffic and settlements; securing and strengthening the functionality of core cities; complementary upgrading and functional enrichment of catchment areas (Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning 2011: 84).

In addition the potential of new partnerships between rural and urban regions is highlighted. Cities and regions will be involved in new forms of cooperation for integrated spatial development. Thus, they should achieve social and economic development, as well as sustainable economic growth (Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning 2011).

2 Findings

In general urban agglomerations with their dynamic development do not necessarily need other planning instruments for effective control, but certainly the instruments must be used. Integrated regional development focuses on interdisciplinary and intercommunal cooperation and steering of the development of agglomerations. While regional planning in lagging regions concentrates on the activation and initiation of development processes, the dynamic city-regions are in need of control and coordination of ongoing development processes.

Despite some progress in intercommunal cooperation in recent decades (often pushed by European Union funding), there is still great need for action. The metaphor of David and Goliath is often used for the cooperation in agglomerations. On the one hand, there is the core city with a high density of services, power but also costs, while, on the other hand, the smaller communities in the agglomeration benefit from the services, contribute only little financially and have less political power. Because of that, the starting point of the cooperation is not equal. Furthermore, the communities are strong legal entities in Austria, and one of their key competences is to design the spatial development on their territory. Financially, there is also no need to cooperate as they gain enough money through local taxes and do not rely on EU or other funds. The study tried to answer the following questions in depth and outlined possible pathways for cooperation in urban agglomerations:

- What prevents cities and towns from coordinating their development planning and working out common solutions?
- Why is the win-win situation not recognized?
- Why is development not controlled at the city-regional level?
- Why must every community offer all service tasks?

The observations and conclusions presented in this paper will hopefully contribute to improved cooperation in urban agglomerations.

2.1 Differentiated Strategies

Austria has nine different planning laws. The main paradigm of spatial development was to achieve and secure equal opportunities for all. Therefore, lagging region was the main focus for decades. Until now spatial planning instruments are equally designed for all regions and they are often used in the same way although the spatial challenges and requirements are different. In the future, the planning laws should recognize the difference between rural and central areas. While in agglomerations the development power is significant and the pressure on undeveloped land is constantly growing, instruments for protection and densification are desperately needed.

2.2 Cooperation Supported by Politics

The change in the European Union's regional funding policy in 2007 offered new perspectives and funding possibilities to urban agglomerations. With the option to enlarge the eligible areas to the entire country (including economically strong regions), the European Union co-financed projects can be realized in urban agglomerations.

Thus, it is up to the province to focus on the core areas. The funding programs of the European Union—through financial incentives—contributed significantly to the affiliation and advancement of cooperation in Austria. As a guiding principle, grants are not awarded to individual communities, but projects must be regionally coordinated and implemented.

Since one of the goals of politics is to exploit all funding, perhaps the focus will increasingly be on dynamic regions in the future. However, it is the responsibility of the province how to use Objective 2 (according to the European Union's regulations). For example, in the area of Graz–Graz Umgebung, the Operational Program “Competitiveness Styria 2007–2013 (objective 2)” has its own priority “URBAN plus: agglomeration development”. Although the available funding of 5.5 million € is relatively low, compared to other programs, nonetheless the program offers the possibility to develop projects on sensitive cooperation topics, e.g., densification of residential areas. The pilot-like cooperation projects could be used successfully as a laboratory for the spatial development in the functional urban region of Graz and a further intensification of the collaboration between regional cooperation, surrounding communities and the city of Graz (Stadt Graz 2013).

2.3 Framework for Cooperation

Cooperation is a useful tool to promote coordination and integrated development in urban agglomerations, but especially in dynamic regions a defined framework is

needed. The strength of cooperative instruments is the flexible and informal use rather than regulatory policies and measures. Moreover, the provinces are encouraged to set up a regulatory framework with development prospects and restrictions. Even now, the provinces have the appropriate planning instruments, but they are not used in practice.

For example, a prescribed strategy paper could be issued, focused on crucial development areas, including priorities and objectives to be broken down in detail by the communities (and not only a vague formulation of goals). Especially when “hard” cooperation issues (settlement and business development, social infrastructure) are addressed, a detailed framework is necessary. This requires a set of regulations on a higher level guiding the local and regional planners.

Successful impulses for regional cooperation are financial resources to be exclusively used for regional initiatives and projects. In addition, the community representatives can blame the province authority for unpopular measures. Certainly this contributes to cooperation of the involved stakeholders and shows added value of an integrated regional development. Generally, planning aims to enable processes with set targets and not prevent development. It is not about excluding competition, but controlling and steering how and where it should happen.

2.4 Top-Down Versus Bottom-Up

Based on the analysis of the case studies, the tension between top-down and bottom-up created partnerships is obvious. In general, the analyzed cooperation models generally follow a top-down driven approach. Cooperation is always a long-term process. The so-called soft cooperation issues are particularly suitable for the initial phase of cooperation.

For the involved parties, even small, visible successes are important. Especially for the politics but also for the public, the necessity and usefulness of regional cooperation must be noticeable. Moreover, cooperation is based on mutual confidence. Accordingly, the shift of persons (e.g., after public votes) always has an impact—either promoting or inhibiting. Often the knowledge and experience in cooperation is lost with a change of the involved persons.

Perhaps a common vision of urban agglomeration development is necessary that is especially based on bottom-up structures. Experience shows that, particularly in agglomerations, there is a high potential for intercommunal cooperation. Also at the regional level—particularly when the agglomeration is located in more than one province—steering is urgently needed.

2.5 Open Up “Hard” Cooperation Areas

The easiest way to cooperation is in so-called win–win situations. All partners benefit from the collaboration, and its successes are easily visible. Classic examples of this are regional cycling trails and sewage or waste associations. In more complex topics, like an intercommunal business location, it is not easy to promote the added value. Yet the politicians still aim to locate the companies within their community. Often communities overlook the fact that an intercommunal business location with a higher quality, as well as corresponding cost and revenue agreements, may bring higher profit for the municipal budget. At present, politicians are still in favor of “get jobs in the community,” as a result of Austrian taxation, where the communities gain direct payments for each workplace within their territory.

In urban agglomerations, the competition primarily focuses on the surrounding communities and not on the core city. The central city generally has a differentiated profile and thus a unique selling position. Therefore, there is no direct competition with the surrounding communities, which differ little from each other in general.

Voluntary partnerships are typically based on the “give-and-take” principle between the actors. Accordingly, the integration of “weak” partners with nothing to offer but in who share the desperate need of cooperation is a challenge. In this case, the limit of voluntary cooperation is reached. Therefore, cooperation in win–win situations is easy to start and to handle, but, if some communities are affected negatively, clear guidelines are needed.

As a guiding principle, the dynamic development processes have to be increasingly interdisciplinary and integrated, as for example traffic planning and landscape protection have a massive impact on the settlement development not only locally but also regionally.

2.6 Participation and Collaboration with Individuals

Currently, cooperation in agglomerations is often just a matter for the local authorities. International examples show success in cooperation with industry and regional initiatives. The aim must be clearly defined for the cooperation with stakeholders. Possible areas of cooperation are health, education, or brownfields. Interested citizens, too, can be potential partners in urban–regional development processes. Especially when it comes to regional identities or development scenarios, the participation of civil society is essential. The inhabitants live an urban–regional life, and they do not care about administrative borders in their everyday lives. They choose to live in an urban surrounding with a high density of services, mobility, and life quality.

2.7 Professionalization and Management

Even though currently active organizations seek more “binding” cooperation instruments and regulatory solutions, there is also the chance for them to achieve a higher quality standard. Unfortunately there is not a single, complete formula for efficient cooperation. Each form of organization has its strengths and weaknesses and must continue to develop with the involved actors. Of course, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel constantly, but rather to exchange and learn from other management units in urban agglomerations.

Urban agglomeration has to overcome the chicken-and-egg syndrome—they are still searching for the perfect form for cooperation as an excuse not to start with their coordination that will shape the form of cooperation by content. Even in informal forms of collaboration, methods or processes are developed to optimize the flow of information. For example, a mandatory “invitation principle” (for events and meetings on issues of regional interest) secures the transparent information flow and keeps all involved partners informed. Then it is up to them to follow the invitation. The organizational form of the management unit is not crucial for the success of the cooperation, but should be in line with its tasks and profile. In principle, the cooperation sets the frame for the organizational form and not vice versa. If it turns out that the existing legal framework is not adequate it can be adjusted easily. The choice of organizational form must correspond to the degree of willingness to cooperate. With upcoming and new challenges in urban agglomeration, new cooperation structures might be necessary and developed.

Participatory processes are important, not only because of the democratic political anchor, but to push and put pressure on the political level. They can give further impetus to regional cooperation and increase liability.

2.8 Awareness Raising and Long-Term Development

In general, the appropriateness and effectiveness of regional cooperation is not seriously questioned. There are clear benefits for the agglomeration, as well as for the involved parties, if the agglomeration development is coordinated. For example, financial resources are used more efficiently or information is more easily accessible and transparent.

The crucial factor for sustainable and successful cooperation is not in the theoretically available potential, but the willingness of the partners to work together and tackle sensible fields of development. Yet, there is no agglomeration awareness among the involved partners and the public. The knowledge, that an agglomeration is a common organism that must function as a whole and not partially, must be spread to a wider public (Hamedinger et al. 2009).

The survey showed the wide field of possible interactions, and the need for action became evident. In the next step, policies for urban agglomerations were elaborated in a broad process: Agenda for Urban Regions in Austria.

3 Need for Action

The “Agenda for Urban Regions in Austria” is the first milestone to implement an Austrian policy for urban regions. It identifies measures for regional actors and especially policymakers on various administrative levels to remain urban regions that are sustainable in the future and to encourage and support collaboration. It was approved by the political decision-making body of the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning² in the year 2017.

3.1 Key Points for an Austrian Policy for Urban Regions and Agglomerations

According to the survey, urban regions have to master challenges in many different fields covering the entire spectrum of spatial development. Nevertheless, currently urban regions are neither sufficiently defined by type of region nor established as planning or action level among political and administrative stakeholders. One of the reasons is that urban regions as functional spaces with flexible borders extend beyond political and administrative borders. This lack of clarity regarding the political responsibility for urban regions often makes it difficult to find support for urban–regional cooperation on the political level.

The complexity of the challenges leads to a double policy: dealing with topics for cooperation and key points of an Austrian agglomeration policy, which are (see Fig. 2).

3.1.1 Urban Regions Have Instruments—To Plan and Develop

At the moment, urban regions have to plan within the legal framework of spatial planning laws. But, nevertheless, they are free to adjust the formal instruments according to their needs. Especially regarding informal instruments, they are flexible. If spatial planning laws are revised, provincial parliaments are advised to react to the spatial needs of agglomerations and design successful instruments. The establishment of

²The political decision-making body of the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning is chaired by the Federal Chancellor and its members include all federal ministers and heads of the Länder, the presidents of the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns and the Austrian Association of Municipalities, as well as the heads of the social and economic partners with a consulting vote.

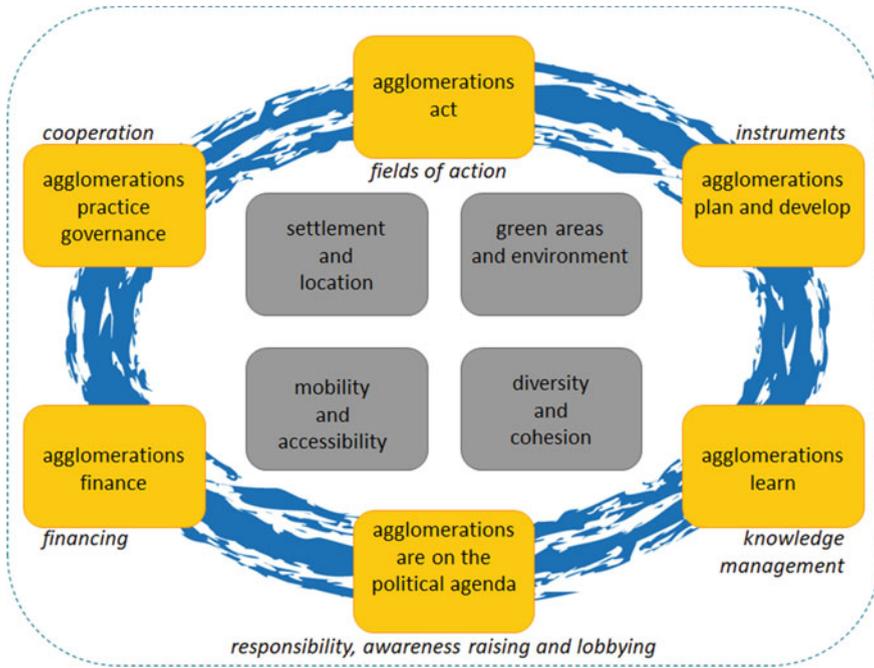


Fig. 2 Agenda for urban regions in Austria—key points

urban agglomerations as a relevant planning and action level can be achieved by, e.g., strengthening bottom-up processes, developing cross-border cooperation models for urban agglomerations, overcoming province and community borders by setting up common projects or intensifying use of public-relations instruments to communicate urban challenges.

3.1.2 Urban Regions Have Governance Structures—To Support Cooperation Among Actors

The experiences showed that cooperation structures support the integrated development. It again depends on the agglomerations as to which organization structure is suitable for the involved actors, the fields of action and the cooperation status. The survey provided an overview of successful forms of cooperation to be used as good practice examples and to be adjusted to agglomerations and their challenges.

3.1.3 Urban Regions Learn—And Engage in Systematic Knowledge Management to Achieve This

In the year 2011, the ÖROK established a platform, which had basically two tasks: to conduct surveys and to organize the yearly conference “Urban Regions Day.” Because the ÖROK support for the platform ended in 2018, it should be supported by the involved actors in the future to secure a knowledge exchange and information platform.

3.1.4 Urban Regions Are Funded—And Have the Means to Create Incentives

This is one of the most fundamental but also most challenging fields of action. Since years, the authorities debate changes in the Austrian revenue-sharing system. It is a never ending story, but of course urban regions can find solutions on their own on a private basis. Maybe also in the future, the EU co-financing will be an important financial player in European agglomerations.

3.1.5 Urban Regions Are on the Political Agenda—And Engage in Awareness Raising and Lobbying to Position Themselves and Achieve Defined Areas of Competence

Finally, also the politicians get more active on urban regions as they learn about the benefits of intensified cooperation.

3.1.6 Urban Regions Take Action—In Their Own Fields of Action and Define Priorities

Each urban region in Austria faces different regional challenges, and the fields of action have to be in line with the local circumstances. There is no blue print to be unrolled to have successful cooperation in urban agglomerations. Because of that, each agglomeration has to identify its fields of action and define priorities.

In the center of the figure, the cooperation topics based on the results of the study are mentioned. To secure a high quality of living, the coordination of the following fields of spatial planning is desperately needed:

- Settlement and location: social housing, density, affordability, accessibility, high-quality internal development, and harmonized development within urban regions
- Mobility and accessibility: mobility partnerships, demand-side-oriented standards for public transport, public transport quality classes, high-speed infrastructure, and slow mobility

- Green areas and environment: landscape accounts in urban regions, regional parks, regional harmonization of building densities, renewable energy concepts and quantitative and qualitative soil protection
- Diversity and cohesion: integrated schemes for urban regions, spaces for encounters, affordable housing, open society, life-long learning, inclusion and participation (Schaffer et al. 2015)

When the policies were adopted by the ÖROK, the question arose where to start and what to do next. Therefore, a roadmap was elaborated in the next step.

3.2 Roadmap to Cooperation in Urban Regions

One of the key points of the “Agenda for Urban Regions in Austria” is that urban regions practice governance to support cooperation among their actors. “The establishment of governance structures in urban regions enables steering and coordination to adapt to the needs of functional areas” (Zech et al. 2016: 13).

Governance, the steering and coordination of spatial development in urban regions is a differentiated and extensive task that does not only concern different actors (which means horizontal coordination) but also the coordination between federal government, federal provinces, municipalities and communities.

In the practice of cooperation in urban regions, the breaks in the facilities with planning resources become apparent, especially between urban core and the surrounding communities. These general conditions complicate coordinated planning “at the urban level”. In planning and administration associations, e.g., common building authority, building yards, professional expertise can be bundled, and at the same time service closeness can be offered. In the case of cross-border planning tasks in urban regions, the support of the federal provinces is necessary. In this way spatial challenges can be solved jointly, resources can be bundled and the willingness of actors in urban regions to cooperate can be raised.

Different or unclear legal provisions complicate the cooperation. The reduction of existing legal and tax barriers, e.g., liability for turnover tax at cooperation businesses between communities shall support and promote the cooperation (Zech et al. 2016).

The roadmap suggests to start with adjustment at the local authorities and continues with the successful already existing cooperations and platforms. The actors are called to bring more formality and binding actions into the steering of the agglomerations.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no single model for successful governance in urban agglomerations. The study showed that there are various innovative approaches, but the

transferability of these methods is limited as they are linked to the involved partners (politics and administration).

Despite the fact that the style of planning involving variable geometries in urban regions is especially critical, as well as the flexible and convertible forms of cooperation in planning processes, the future of politics for urban regions needs commitment, structure, and standards. The political representation of urban regions is often unclear or less visible, and the cooperation in various forums and processes partly overlapping in time and space is time-consuming. Nevertheless, urban–regional planning tasks emerge onto the political stage (Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning 2017). Summing up, there is still a long and winding road to go, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

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