

Generalizing urban sustainability success stories: a discussion on selected European cases

Introduction

The European Union has intergovernmental frameworks for international co-operation between nationally funded research activities. COST activities funded under European Science Foundation enable scientific networks and scientists to collaborate in a wide spectrum of activities in research and technology. One of these COST Actions is COST-C27 that deals with sustainable development policies for minor deprived urban communities. The Action launched two background studies to overview the current status of research regarding sustainable development in minor deprived communities and concerning deprivation phenomena. The main underlying start-up objectives are to select case studies and to put forward guidelines and preliminary criteria for that selection. Albeit six initial criteria were assembled for those areas, namely municipal or inter-municipal based, under-endowed in financial and technical aspects, undergoing pressure for unsustainable development, implementing or having implemented successful development strategies, related to existing EU policies and finally, balanced in terms of typology and geographical distribution, reality proves richer. The challenge to select relevant case studies among European experiences with ultimate underlying objectives to strengthen economic and social cohesion in the European Union and to improve the effectiveness of policies and instruments for regional development and cohesion, for urban policies and sustainable development impends in the researchers. This Europe-wide co-operation following key- objectives to transfer and exchange information, knowledge and good practices between parts of Europe allows for a rich inner acquired knowledge at the underlying processes, discussions and outcomes related to sustainable development policies in remote areas of Europe.

The aim of this paper is to strengthen the theoretical and methodological foundations of the ongoing research on minor deprived urban communities, laying bare the underlying causes of these phenomena. Specific regional assistance programmes long existent in the former EU12 are now in their last cycle (2007- 2013) for countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain. Concerning most of the former policies, the priorities have been set at achieving a given standard of economic growth without clear strategies for spatial development in Europe. Such an approach has led to an inefficient use of resources and poses problems to the future. The recognition by the EU of the importance of the environment has led to the evolution of a range of policies aimed at achieving sustainable development. In several European countries, as a result of the loss of jobs in the agriculture and also industrial sectors and the ever present out-migration from rural areas, major fractures have been widening between different territories in terms of their development prospects. The promotion of enlarged European contacts in this field, further pursuing the practice of collaboration among not only researchers backgrounds from social sciences and from engineering but also individual and institutional actors (such as municipalities, NGO's, multilateral agencies) allows for higher expectations concerning strategic action towards minor urban deprived communities. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 analyses COST C17 countries in terms of population and surface characteristics Section 3 presents and discusses quantitative and qualitative approaches to define and select minor urban deprived communities. Section 4. The striking differences launch the debate on the usefulness of the municipal level as research unit. These thoughts are further pursued and explained in the summing up in Section 5 which proposes increasing interaction among different frameworks of analysis adopted by researchers with different backgrounds.

The Municipalities in the COST C27 Action

COST C27 Action comprises 16 countries, including two that do not belong to European Union. In all these countries, striking differences do exist at municipal level. In order to better understand the fundamental differences between what constitutes a municipality amongst the countries in COST C27, a simple inventory including total surface area, number of municipal units and population per municipality was collected and analysed (Table 1). Data was obtained for the lowest administrative level capable of approving development plans, and that level was considered the “municipality” unit discussed in this paper. For instance, Portugal’s municipalities are further divided into freguesias (an administrative unit similar to the English civil parishes). However, since these are not ascribed the power to approve or reject plans, they were not considered in the analysis.

Table 1 – Number and average surface area per municipality in the COST C27 countries

COST C27 Country	Total Surface Area (km ²)	No. of Municipalities	Average Area per Municipality (km ²)
Belgium	30 158	589	51,2
Cyprus	9 000	24	375,0
Czech Republic	79 000	6 249	12,6
Denmark	49 094	98	501,0
Finland	338 000	448	754,5
Greece	131 957	914	144,4
Hungary	93 000	3 200	29,1
Italy	301 263	8 104	37,2
Latvia	65 000	563	115,5
Norway	323 802	431	751,3
Poland	313 000	2 489	125,8
Portugal	92 072	309	298,0
Spain	504 782	8 111	62,2
Sweden	450 000	290	1 551,7
Switzerland	41 290	2 929	14,1
Turkey	780 580	3 215	242,8

Amongst the COST C27 countries, the distribution of number of municipalities is diverse, as is the average surface area per municipality. Assuming administrative units with similar competencies, the figures above assert the differences in terms of how many and how large these territorial decision units can be from one country to another. The spatial distribution of these differences is illustrated in Figure 1.

According to the data ranges considered, four clusters are identified. A Northern cluster including Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, which municipalities are the largest of the group, averaging over 500 km² of surface area per municipal unit. A second group including mostly Eastern (Latvia and Poland) and Southeastern countries (Cyprus, Greece and Turkey) includes municipalities that range from 115 to 380 km² on average. Despite being a Western country, Portugal is also included in this category. A third cluster that varied in geographical location includes municipalities that are smaller in average surface area, from 30 to 65 km² (Belgium, Hungary, Italy and Spain). Finally, the smallest municipalities are located in Central Europe, in the Czech Republic and Switzerland.

In terms of population distribution per municipality, there are also stark differences from one Country to another. In order to better understand these differences, population data for the ten most and ten least populated municipalities in each Country were organised into data tables (see Appendix). The average population per municipality was calculated

considering these sets of ten municipalities. Supported by the illustrations presented in Figures _2 and _3, a few examples are discussed below.

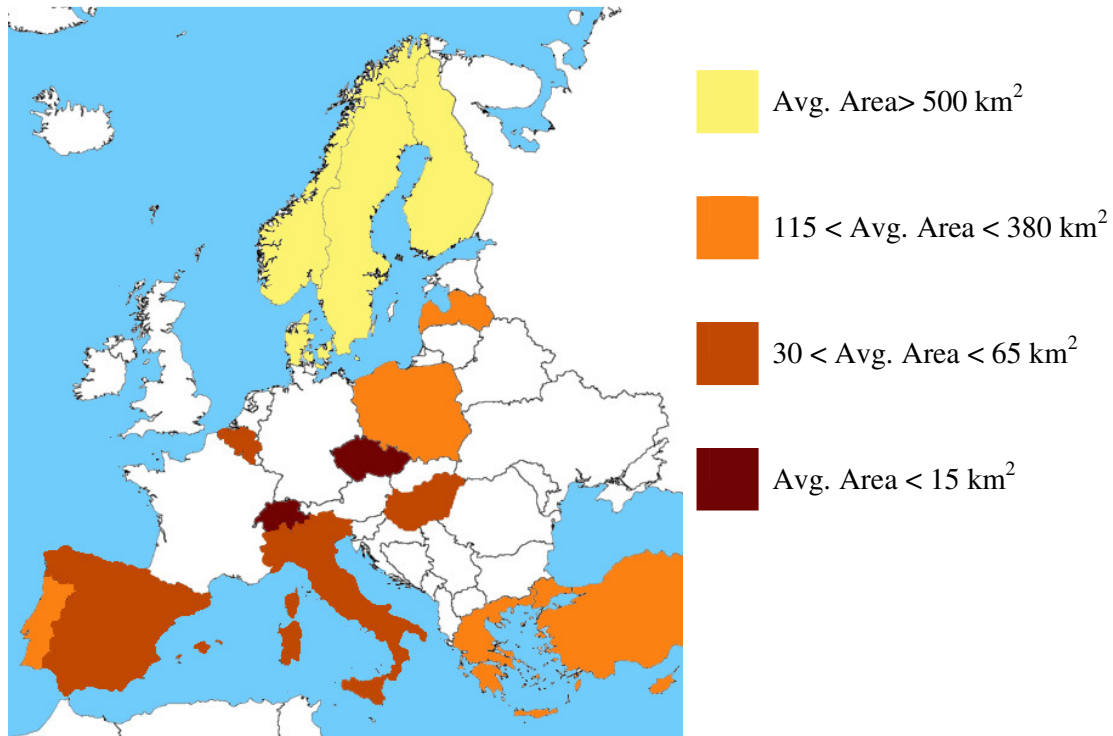
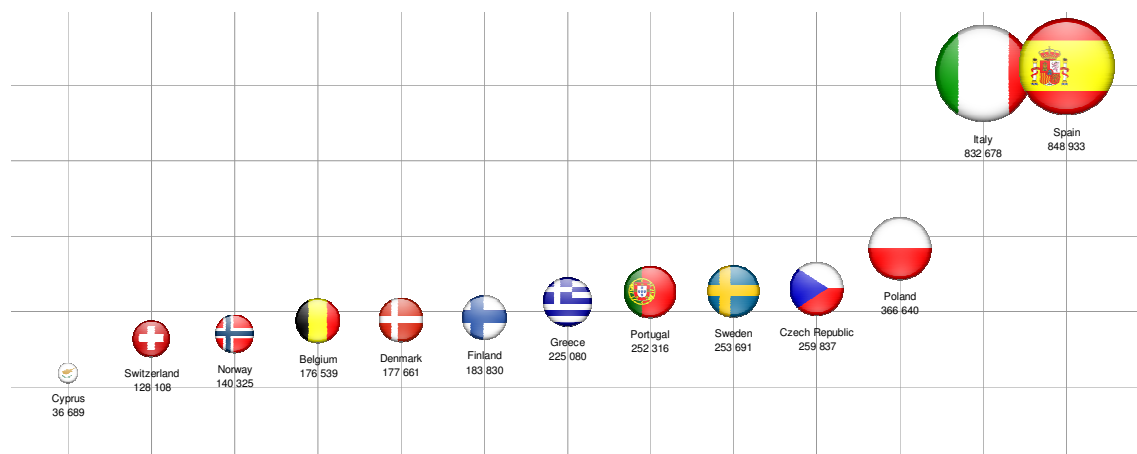


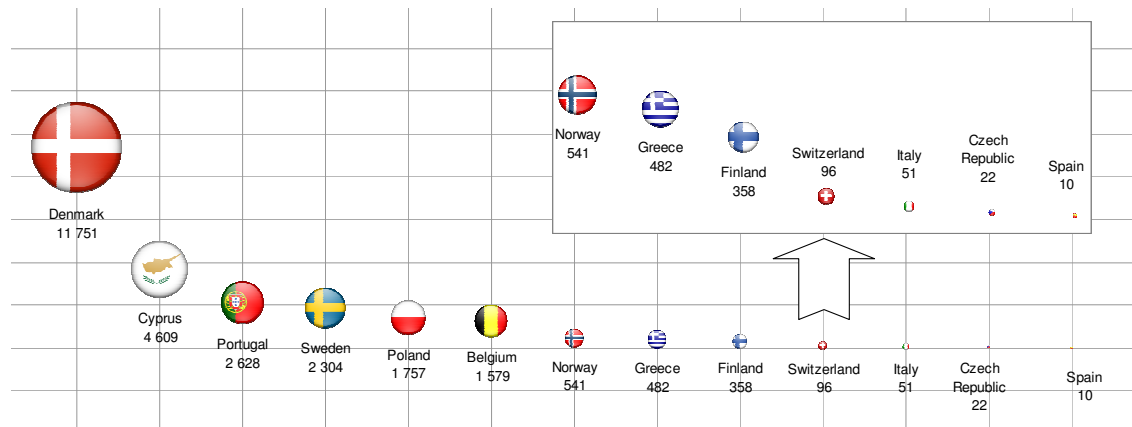
Figure 1 - COST C27 Countries according to average area per municipality

In terms of the ten most populated municipalities in the COST C27 universe, Italy and Spain clearly lead with an average of over 830 000 inhabitants per municipality. Poland follows with approximately 370 000 inhabitants per municipality, an average number that is a clear departure from the Italian and Spanish cases. All other Countries excluding Cyprus display average population sizes between approximately 130 000 (Switzerland) and 260 000 (Czech Republic) inhabitants per most populated municipality. Cyprus presents the lowest population average, at little over 36 000 inhabitants.



**Figure 2 – Average population in the ten most populated municipalities per COST C27 Country
(data not available for Hungary, Latvia and Turkey)**

The results for the ten least populated municipalities reveal three clusters of population sizes. Denmark takes the lead with an average of almost 12 000 inhabitants amongst its least ten populated municipalities. Cyprus, Portugal, Sweden, Poland and Belgium encompass a second cluster of average population sizes ranging from approximately 4 600 (Cyprus) to 1 579 (Belgium). A third cluster includes the remaining Countries, for which average population numbers are low. Within this group, Norway, Greece and Finland manage to display a few hundreds of inhabitants per municipality, whereas Switzerland, Italy, the Czech Republic and Spain exhibit an average population of less than 100.



**Figure 3 – Average population in the ten least populated municipalities per COST C27 Country
(data not available for Hungary, Latvia and Turkey)**

The Czech Republic, Spain and Italy represent an extreme situation, displaying similar population sizes per municipality between them. All three Countries include over 6 000 municipalities (over 8 000 for Italy and Spain) and form a group that is clearly apart from their COST C27 counterparts. The Czech Republic includes the least populated (Březina, with 5 inhabitants). In contrast, it also includes the fifth most populated municipality (Praha, with 1 188 126 inhabitants) surpassed only by Madrid (Spain, 2 957 058 inhabitants), Roma (Italy, 2 546 804 inhabitants), Barcelona (Spain, 1 505 325 inhabitants) and Milano (Italy, 1 256 211 inhabitants). Overall, these are the countries for which the largest variation in population is observed (a total of 1 188 121 inhabitants between the most and the least populated municipalities in the Czech Republic, followed by 2 546 771 inhabitants in Italy and 2 957 052 inhabitants in Spain).

Where municipalities are larger in size, they are also larger in population numbers. Such is the case for Portugal and Sweden. These countries display similarities in the total number of municipalities and population distribution per municipality. For the most populated municipalities, the numbers are similar in their magnitude. The average population sizes are 252 316 (Portugal) and 253 691 (Sweden) inhabitants per most populated municipality. Also, the majority of the least populated municipalities includes populations well above 1 000 inhabitants in both Countries, yielding an average of 2 628 inhabitants per least populated municipality in Portugal and 2 304 inhabitants in Sweden.

In view of these examples, there is a striking difference among municipalities in EU in terms of population and surface averages, but also minimum figures. These are certainly correlated with more or less extensive powers. As such, the municipality level that seems so appropriate for analysis within national boundaries, with the exception of Poland, may become less viable when working at the European context. This situation may demand the undifferentiated use of municipalities or villages or urban communities, depending on the countries at stake. In fact, the need for clear definitions on what the term “minor” or “small”

mean with regards to territorial units across the COST C27 group of Countries seems to be undermined by historically different processes of creation and re-arrangement of the municipal boundaries. But what may appear as a liability in statistical terms may become an asset in territory and landscape premises.

European Minor Deprived Urban Communities (MDUC)

What constitutes a minor deprived urban community (MDUC) is not identical from country to country within EU, given their different cultural, historical and administrative backgrounds. The very definition of each of the terms “minor”, “deprived”, “urban” and “community” do not translate literally nor equally in each country’s language, for each adequate and in some instances, a more appropriate designation had to be established. Nevertheless, what is meant by the adopted terminology has been unanimously accepted to mean small urban and/or population clusters that have been dealing with circumstances such that desired development and growth have been hindered and degraded. These MDUC are underprivileged, poor communities that require or have required in the past, the intervention of external assistance towards their sustained and sustainable livelihoods and adequate quality of life.

The identification of such MDUC poses a number of obstacles regarding not only the definition and understanding of what is “poor and underprivileged” but also in terms of size and available statistics. Taking into consideration the different realities from country to country – what is underprivileged for some might not be so for others – a number of approaches are possible. The goal is to establish a set of common criteria for identifying and selecting such communities. Considering governance and the existence of endowed political powers, the political administrative level of Municipality could become a first level of analysis. The following sections attempt a cross-comparative analysis between the different realities of Cost C27 countries and their respective municipalities.

Quantitative approaches per country

The identification of MDUC may be carried out via quantitative approaches such as the methodology presented by Antunes and Bigotte (2007). Based on a series of quantified indicators and criteria, the authors were able to identify clusters of MDUC across continental Portugal using spatial multicriteria analysis techniques (Figure 6).

The size of the communities was set by considering the 20% smaller municipalities in terms of population size, which corresponded to populations of 7 288 inhabitants or less (2001 census). Since the national average was 35 501 inhabitants per municipality, the boundary value was deemed adequate and representative of what a small community is, since 80% of the Country exhibited populations greater than that.

Community deprivation was assessed by evaluating the purchasing power index (PPI) for the 20% least affluent municipalities, yielding a PPI that was 53.7 or less. Considering the national average of 100 PPI, the set point was deemed adequate and representative. By overlapping the results obtained via these two approaches, 20 municipalities were identified and selected for further analysis, in order to evaluate population size, PPI, education and employment trends. Also, this analysis allowed the distinction between successful and unsuccessful MDUC.

These municipalities are located in all planning regions with the exception of Lisbon and Tagus Valley region. They tend to be surrounded by other problematic municipalities either in population shortage or in economic terms. At first glance, analysing the map (see Figure 6) where the location of these municipalities shows, it is obvious that they belong to some clusters and lack of accessibility in comparison with neighbouring sub regions, may be one of the strongest determinant factors for the present situation.

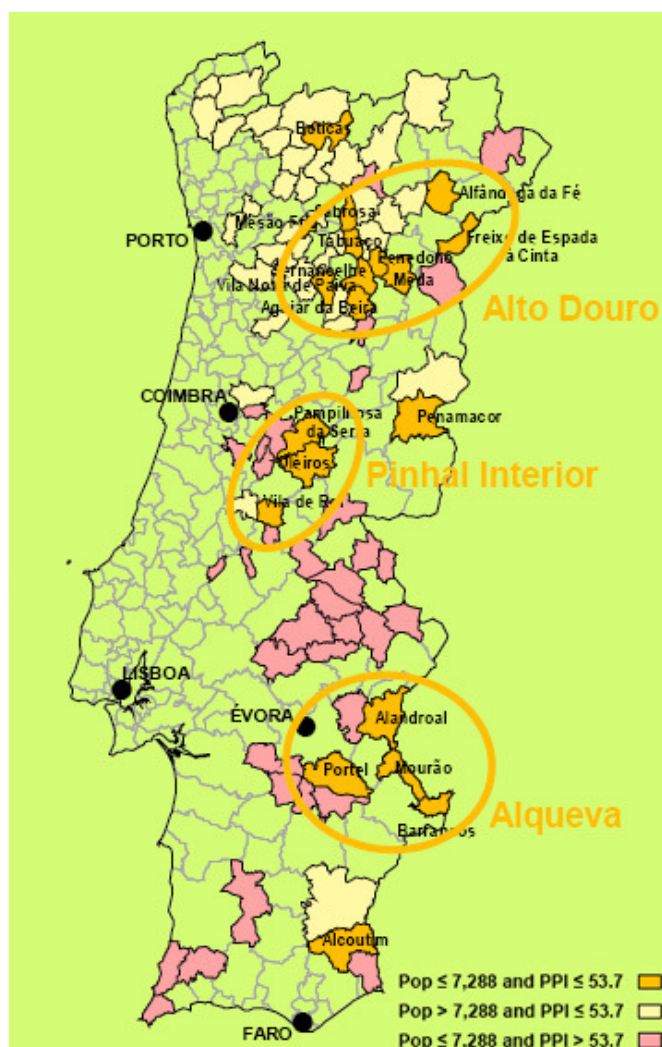


Figure 6 – MDUC identification in Portugal (Antunes and Bigotte, 2007)

A similar quantitative approach to identifying and selecting MDUC was also presented by Tiboni et al. (2007). Using national, regional and provincial scope indicators, the authors were able to identify MDUC in Italy (Figure 7). National scope indicators included (1) change in population for a given period; (2) population density; (3) old age rate, and (4) number of old people per child. Regional and provincial scope indicators included more (5) rate of dependence; (6) annual budget, and (7) average travel time to provincial seat. Likewise, the Italian authors recommended diachronic analysis to identify areas that have either improved or worsened in terms of deprivation.



Figure 7 - MDUC identification in Italy (Tiboni et al., 2007)

Incorporating Qualitative Approaches

Where concepts are developed for sustainable management of the urban environment, technical approaches must be in synergy with the cultural, social, environmental and economic realities of the people themselves. The statement of the fourth pillar of sustainability – the cultural – is especially important in minor deprived context. Many factors are relevant to any attempt to improve living conditions. They include social organization, local leadership and conflicts, collaboration and communication, interaction and networking, community initiatives, and control of access to different resources. It is important to identify approaches to planning that will encourage consideration of these factors and their inclusion in concepts for urban management. Additionally, ways of developing synergy between different categories of actors and institutions need to be examined. For such a purpose, detecting and analysing networks especially if found at remote locations may disclose the path towards success stories and key actors in development processes.

Comparative research, as widely known, shows that the presence of close, homogenous and active “growth coalitions” is decisive in generating spatial economic dynamism. They mobilise the required financial resources, set up informal and formal institutional structures and bring key people together, by linking the more virtual “space flows” to global spatial networks and the more physical “space of places” to local spatial structures.

There seems to exist a clear link between effective capacity for pressure from local civic groups and the municipal income. As it happens the most vulnerable municipalities are usually the most deprived in terms of financial resources and, hence, lack strong pressure groups to challenge unsustainable development proposals.

The new Europe that will emerge from the Treaty of Lisbon will indeed call for a greater capacity of participation than before. But above all, in order to stay competitive, a greater capacity for initiative. Participation and initiative are then transformed into real key terms for European Union future.

For example, in terms of EU funds, a fourth (LEADER+) axis has been added dealing with job opportunities, tourism and basic services in rural districts. That is, one of the few programs where actual leadership belongs to groups of citizens and local associations, sees its framework of action enlarged towards fields that were previously within the competencies of municipalities.

A global analysis of the European Sustainable Development Strategy shows spatial planning intimately connected with this Strategy. After the trends for cohesion already pursued in the fifties and in the sixties, there came a trend for sustainability that can be traced to mid sixties conceptually but actually starts to have guidelines for action only near the nineties. The ever reminiscent goal of competition keeps along the times and most effectively at recession times, even when processes and structures comprise more virtual global processes and more physical local structures. Also in terms of layers and dimensions, the cultural dimension superimposes upon the occupation, the networks and the ground layers. But while the cultural dimension rates higher at local level, the networks layer gets its highest importance at European level.

This may raise a clear conflict between the legitimate wishes of small communities to group and develop and a regional/national urban model in which the role and importance of these minor communities is limited and, thus, no money is allocated to them. Moreover, in many instances, environmental preservation is seen as a way to prevent “economic” development purely for the interest of outsiders. This raises issues of equity. But at the same time, these challenges can be seen as opportunities where the repositioning through networking in the European map brings accrued sense of place through economic dynamism. The compulsory Rural Development Programmes (RDP) are being analysed by working group 1 of COST C27 Action and may provide common ground for trends and regulations among minor deprived communities in the EU.

Other studies pertaining to strategic actions and concerning funding by EU are being assembled and analysed. Since tourism is one of the driving economic activities in natural areas, it has become the focus of strategies to enhance governance and allow entrepreneurs and residents to actively participate in the definition of development guidelines. Swarbrooke (2005) suggests that the key issues in the sustainable tourism debate are the principle of partnership, green tourism, community involvement and local control, de-marketing, places, time, people, concept of carrying capacity, ecotourism, lack of performance indicators, value judgments and lack of factual evidence.

For example, the assembling of potentially interesting case studies in terms of best practices, in the case of Portugal, involves villages such as the ones that are partners of the European Network of Village Tourism. This is a project financed by the Interreg III C South program, which joins eight partners from five European regions such as Finland, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Romania, with a common goal of creating a new tourism product based in the preservation of traditional rural villages, at social, economical and cultural level. The Interreg IIIC strand of the Programme focuses on interregional cooperation – as distinct from Interreg IIIA and Interreg IIIB strands focusing on cross-border and transnational cooperation respectively.

This Network is linked through the niche market and already has a brand and a logo “Genuineland” catering for Imaginary Tourism, one of the outcomes of this partnership that was granted the Ulysses 2007 Award for Innovation in Tourism granted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization. This partnership involves, among others, tourism boards, universities, local councils, regional directorates. Fourteen villages are included in Alentejo and they joined the Network through intense public participation. Other villages that were initially contacted did not show a focus on the aims of the project and their joining the Network was halted after a certain number of meetings.

Alentejo sub-region has been one of the pioneers in following the new trends of Activity Tourism and several enterprises have emerged in the market. But the relevance of this Network is that it occurs in fourteen rather remote and unimportant villages, connecting them with several other European villages. Furthermore, its outcomes are already well noticeable in the number of tourism projects submitted for funding at regional level.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to strengthen the theoretical and methodological foundations of the ongoing research on minor deprived urban communities, increasing interaction among different frameworks of analysis adopted by researchers with backgrounds from social sciences and from engineering. The promotion of enlarged European contacts in this field, further pursuing the practice of collaboration among not only researchers but also individual and institutional actors (such as municipalities, NGO's, multilateral agencies) allows for higher expectations concerning strategic action towards minor urban deprived communities.

Comparative research shows that the presence of close, homogenous and active “growth coalitions” is decisive in generating spatial economic dynamism. They mobilise the required financial resource, set up informal and formal institutional structures and bring key people together.

The relevance of regular networking and sharing of experiences among different small urban deprived areas in Europe and between individual and institutional actors is bound to bring further induced strategic action concerning this issue in the future. Effectively, this continuous cooperation framework to exchange information on and best practices towards minor urban deprived communities allows for better informed development strategies and pilot actions essential for evolving EU into higher levels of cohesion. Another important aspect is the opportunity to establish links between the more virtual “space flows” to global spatial networks and the more physical “space of places” to local spatial structures.

Debate over definitions and actual characteristics in terms of population, surfaces and other indicators follows the inherent different thresholds found at COST C27 countries in

terms of municipal boundaries. Two methods developed for Portugal and for Italy were singled out because of the depth of the quantitative analysis already undertaken at both countries. But the reasons for choosing data sets with abundant and updated figures does not bar other methods, such as qualitative approaches, to be used to find minor deprived communities. In some European countries these methods can be used jointly together to find the most relevant case studies that will enable recommendations for implementation of more adequate policies for sustainable development.

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Cristina Carvalho Danko, Lecturer, Portugal
Júlia Maria Lourenço, Assistant Professor, Portugal

